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COCO THE CLOWN

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# COCO THE CLOWN

*By Himself*

Nicolai Poliakoff



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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

I wish to thank Anna Hadfield  
for the help she has given me  
in the writing of this book

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## CHARIVARI

'HURRY along, please! The show starts in five minutes. One-and-three to your right, two-and-six to your left. Three-and-nine, five shillings, and seven-and-six straight forward. Hurry along there, please. Programme?''

The ring-master, in his pink coat and shiny top hat, stands beside the ring. The first boom of the drum. The lights go up. A rustle of expectancy seems to pass over the audience. Two more booms. The band strikes up a military air. Here they come — the parade, the circus! Smartly across the ring march acrobats, jugglers, trampolinists, trapeze artistes, midgets, men and women in different costumes and of all nationalities. Here is a fairy sitting in a coach drawn by six Shetland ponies. Beautiful horses prance daintily across the ring, rider and horse welded together in harmony. And at last—Charivari!

Tumbling into the ring like a whirlwind come the clowns and augustes. They trip, they fall, they bounce up and somersault, they hit each other, they insult each other, they turn and run.

And among them is Coco. Coco, with his big red nose, and his flaming hair that wildly stands on end. Coco, with his enormous boots that the children love so much, and his clothes all far too

big for him. Every one knows Coco. But does any one among the laughing audience know the real Coco under the grease paint, the real man hidden in the baggy clothes? I think not many. And that is why this book has been written.

## CHAPTER I

### A SAD FAMILY IN DVINSK

IN December 1905, when I was just five years old, Dvinsk was a small town, about three hundred miles south of Leningrad, or St Petersburg as it was then, and about ninety-five miles from Riga.

It was the middle of winter at Dvinsk—bitterly cold, with grey, leaden skies, and everything buried deep in snow. On the outskirts of the town, in the Green Street, was a large house divided into apartments, and in three ground-floor rooms lived a large family. There were a mother and father, and eight small children.

People were going in and out of the rooms, and all was noise and bustle. In the midst of this turmoil the eight children were quietly crying. The smaller ones did not know why they cried; they cried because the older ones cried. Neighbours were trying to comfort the woman, who was clinging to her husband, and weeping bitterly. He tried to calm her, saying gently that he would be back soon.

The eldest boy went to his mother. ‘Oh, mother, mother, don’t cry so,’ he said. ‘Father will soon come back.’

This boy was my eldest brother, Alexander, and the man was my father. He had been mobilized

to fight in the Russian army against the Japanese invaders.

I felt miserable that my father had to leave us, and more miserable because my mother cried so; and so I was crying too. But I remember that at the same time I felt happy and proud to see my father dressed in such a smart uniform. He had a big black bearskin on his head, and fine high knee boots, and I liked best of all the ammunition belt round his waist.

My father left us. I ran to my mother and said: 'Don't cry, mother. Father will soon finish the war.'

My mother kissed me, but Alexander said: 'Quiet, Nicolai. Be quiet and go to bed.'

I went to bed, but it was a long time before I went to sleep. It seemed to me that I could see armies of soldiers passing in front of my eyes, my father among them, and I wondered why he had to go away and leave us.

My mother did not go to bed that night. When my youngest brother, who was only eight months old, started to cry, she took him into her arms, and sat nursing him all night in front of the fire, crying quietly.

None of us went to school next morning. I went out into the yard at the back of the house where all the children played. When they saw me they all cried: 'Here is Nicolai. His father has gone to the war.'

I walked along with my chest stuck out, feeling very proud of my father.

One of my friends came up to me and said: 'Well, Nicolai, no more theatres for you.'

This made me feel very sad again. I loved the theatre. My father had been property man at the only theatre in the town. On most days he had taken me down there with him, and I longed to grow up so that I could work in one.

Perhaps I felt like this because the first thing my eyes ever saw was the inside of a theatre. This is true, because I was born in one. My mother used to help my father with the costumes in a theatre at Besinowiz. One day she was taken ill, and a doctor was sent for. When he came out of the dressing room where she lay, he said to my father: 'Congratulations, M. Poliakoff, you have a fine son.'

## CHAPTER II

### SINGING FOR MY SUPPER

ONE day, a week after my father had left us, we were all sitting round the table at home. There was very little food in the house, and we were too hungry to play. The room was cold because the fire was nearly out, and there was nothing more to put on it. I wondered how I could find something for us to eat.

I got up and went out into the street. When I had trudged through the snow for several minutes I came to a café. I pressed my face against the window. I could see cakes and bread there, and my mouth watered. I was so hungry I decided to go into the shop and ask for a job. But it took me a long time to pluck up enough courage to go in.

At last I could stand out in the snow no longer, and I went in. The shop was kept by an old Turk, and the sight of him nearly sent me out into the street again. He was a short man with an enormous paunch and tremendously long moustaches. His clothes were greasy, and he looked as if he hadn't washed for a long time. But he spoke to me quite kindly.

'Well, little one, what do you want?'

At first I couldn't answer, there seemed to be

a lump in my throat. But I swallowed it, and the smell of the bread gave me courage.

'Please, sir,' I said, 'I want a job. My father has gone to the war, and there is no one to look after us, and we haven't any food.'

He looked at me and laughed. 'How old are you?' he said.

'Please, sir, I was five last October.'

'But you're so small, what can you do?'

'I can sweep the floor,' I said. 'I can open and shut the door for your customers. And I can sing, too.'

'What can you sing?' he asked.

I stood up very straight, stuck out my chest, and started to sing *Tusa Tusa*. This is a very old Russian song that my mother had taught me.

I was still singing lustily when the door opened and four officers came in. They looked at me and laughed.

'Ha! What's this — a young nightingale?' said one.

'Let's take him to the club with us, and give our comrades a surprise,' said another.

They asked me if I would go with them, and I said I would.

They made their purchases, and we went outside. There was a sleigh with three horses waiting. One of the officers picked me up and threw me to another in the sleigh. He tucked me up in a big black bearskin, and with a jingle of bells we were off to the club.

When we arrived at the club one of the officers told me that he wanted me to stand in the middle of the floor and sing my *Tusa Tusa*. I felt very frightened when we got inside. I was still very hungry, and very dirty, and I wanted to cry. But I remembered that I had a father at the war.

Suddenly one of the officers stepped into the middle of the floor and held up his hand. The orchestra stopped playing, and all the people stopped talking.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' he began, 'I have a great surprise for you. Here is the finest singer in all the Russias.'

He beckoned to me to step forward.

There was an expectant hush, and then what a roar there was when the people saw me. But I can remember vividly to this day how the feeling of fear left me, young child that I was, when I was faced with an audience, and what a feeling of confidence suddenly possessed me. When the laughter died down I started to sing my song.

When I had finished they applauded and shouted for more. I didn't know any more songs, so I started to dance, and to tumble like the clowns I had seen in the theatre. This pleased them more than my singing, and I did some more.

Suddenly I thought of my brothers and sisters, and my mother at home, and it seemed a very long way away. I felt I must go home. I ran to one of the officers who had brought me and asked him if he would take me home.

'Certainly, little one, if you *want* to go home I will take you.'

'I must go home, sir, my mother will be frightened because I've been away so long.'

The officers made a collection and gave me thirty-two copecks. They told the sleigh driver to take me back to the Turkish café.

When we got there the driver asked me if I was very hungry. I said no, but he bought me a basket of pastries, and told me to take them to my brothers and sisters at home.

Clutching my money in one hand and the basket of cakes in the other, I ran home through the snow and darkness as quickly as I could. How proud I was and how happy.

When I reached the house I kicked on the door and shouted: 'Mother, please let me in. It's Nicolai. Hurry, please!'

Alexander opened the door. My mother said: 'Oh Nicolai, where have you been? We've looked all over the town for you.'

I was half crying with pride and happiness, and couldn't speak, so I just gave her the cakes and the money instead. I looked up into her face, but there was no look of joy and no embrace for Nicolai. My mother looked frightened, and said: 'Nicolai, where did you get all this from?'

'I earned it,' I said. 'I've been working, and I've got all this for you.'

'Oh, Nicolai, you have stolen. You must take it back.'

I started to cry, and tried to explain.

'Please believe me, mother. I *have* been working, I 've been singing and dancing, and people gave me the money and cakes.'

But my mother wouldn't believe me. She picked up the cakes and money, and took me by the hand.

'Come along and show me where you got this,' she said.

We trudged through the snow back to the café. I was tired and hungry and as bitterly unhappy as only a misunderstood child can be. I wept all the way.

When we got to the café my mother took me inside, and nervously asked the old Turk if that was where I had got the cakes.

'Yes,' he said, 'and the money was given him by the officers at the club for singing and dancing.'

Then my mother kissed me warmly, and I felt proud and happy again.

'Let us go home,' she said, 'we will have the pastries for supper.'

We hurried home, stopping on the way to spend some of the money on fuel for the stove.

I shall never forget my brothers' and sisters' faces when they saw the food. And I shall never forget the happiness of that evening, sitting round the table, the stove bright and warm, eating those cakes.

## CHAPTER III

### RUMBLINGS OF A STORM

WHEN my father left us he was sent to Irkutsk in Siberia. After he had been away a few months we heard that an army order had been issued demobilizing all soldiers who had more than five children. After that my mother and all we children were in a great state of excitement and expectation all the time.

But while he was away there were heard in Dvinsk the first rumblings of that storm that later was to shake the whole of Russia.

Although I didn't know what it was all about, I remember people standing huddled together at street corners, and now and then a red flag could be seen. These people muttered and mumbled to themselves, but very quietly. But sometimes a lot of people would get together and sing revolutionary songs. And then, with a great clatter of hooves, the Cossacks would come, galloping up on their horses, cracking their long whips, and firing their guns into the air. They would crowd into the people, who would scatter with cries and curses.

I had an uncle in Dvinsk. He was my father's brother, and was a tailor by trade, although he

had not worked for some time. He wasn't taken for a soldier because he was blind in one eye. Every day he would come to our house and ask if my father had returned.

One day I saw uncle standing on a box at a street corner. He was talking and shouting to a large crowd. While he was still there the Cossacks came. The crowd fled in all directions, and I saw my uncle running away as hard as he could with the soldiers after him.

One evening, soon after this, we were all gathered round the stove. There was a knock at the door. Mother got up to open it, and there stood my father.

How glad we all were, and how we laughed and cried. Father went out to buy some food and when he came back we had the biggest meal we had had for months. We all laughed and talked at once, eating at the same time, too.

But in spite of this happiness I was a little disappointed. I had expected my father to come back riding a horse, and wearing rows and rows of medals—a hero. And here he was, just like many another soldier I had seen. I felt some childish resentment at this. And I remembered how strict my father was. I realized that no longer would I be able to go daily to the officers' club to sing and dance, as I had been doing since he left.

One evening we were sitting round the stove listening to father, who was telling us tales of the war. Suddenly the door burst open and my

uncle rushed in. His face looked frightened, and he was panting for breath.

'The police are after me, Peter,' he gasped, 'I must leave the country. Help me, or it will be too late.'

My father took him by the arm, and they went out together.

Next day my father returned and told us that my uncle was going to Canada. I have never seen him since.

## CHAPTER IV

### A STAGE IN A BACK YARD

'NICOLAI, people have told me that you have been singing and dancing at the officers' club. Is it true?'

'Yes, father,' I said.

At this my father was very angry, and said that he would not have his children doing such things. He made me promise that I wouldn't go there again.

I didn't keep this promise. We were still hungry. Father's job at the theatre was gone, and the money he had earned in the army was soon spent. So I used to go secretly to the club. Only my mother knew. I would give her the money I earned, and she would promise not to tell my father.

One day a friend of the family came in to see us. He said to my father: 'Peter, one day your little Nicolai is going to be a great artiste. At the Turk's café last night—there was little Nicolai, singing and dancing. Yes, a great artiste.'

I looked at my father. His face was like a thunder-cloud. I crept into another room.

When the friend had gone my father called me to him.

'Nicolai, you have broken your promise. You must be punished.'

He beat me. It was the first beating I had had and I felt it for many days.

But I had made up my mind that I would be an artiste, and a beating could not stop me. Nearly every day I managed to creep away to the cafés and clubs and do my singing and dancing.

But again my father found out. This time he did not beat me. He decided to send me to school.

From the very first I really liked school, and every morning I was ready and eager for school to start. But I did not forget that I was going to be a great artiste, and I spent all my spare time practising new dances and songs.

One day I had an idea. I decided that the next Saturday afternoon I would have a show of my own in our back yard. My brothers helped me build a stage from odd pieces of wood and old boxes. When it was ready we collected all the children of the neighbourhood. We charged them half a copeck admittance. I made up my face with pieces of charcoal, and did my turns. The children seemed to enjoy it, and I decided to have a show every Saturday afternoon.

With the money I got from the children I bought paper and made costumes and hats out of it. And we improved the stage. I spent all my spare time thinking out new acts, and gags that would amuse the audience. When they were amused and their laughter rang out it was better than any music to my childish ears.

## CHAPTER V

### MY FIRST PART

ABOUT a year later, when I was six and a half, we heard that a travelling theatre was coming to the town. This made every one very excited, because a travelling theatre was a rare treat. At last the great day arrived, and the whole town turned out to greet the troupe. Needless to say I wormed my small body well to the front. We followed them right to the theatre, where the first performance was to be given on the Saturday.

This event made everything seem like a holiday, the sun shone, and I was so excited I did not know how I should wait until Saturday came.

That night my father came home with his face all smiles.

'I have a job. I am property man at the theatre.'

At this my mother almost wept for joy. Father didn't very often have a job. A job meant food and warmth, and new clothes for the winter, which in Russia always comes too soon.

My father was away at the theatre all next day, preparing the stage and props for the opening performance.

When he came home in the evening he said to

my mother: 'I have everything ready, but what am I going to do? They need a little girl for the show.'

For some time they talked and argued about who they could find. And all the time some strange excitement was mounting in me, until I could bear it no longer.

'Father,' I said, my voice trembling, 'wouldn't a little boy do instead?'

My father glanced down at me. 'No, of course not, it must be a girl.'

'But father, I can dress up like a girl, and talk like one too.'

But my father wouldn't hear of it, and I felt the tears stinging my eyes, when my mother said: 'You could take Nicolai to the theatre to-morrow, and see what the manager says.'

'Very well,' said my father, 'I will.'

I hardly slept at all that night. I tossed and turned, and never had a night seemed so long. I got up very early and dressed, and was ready a long time before my father was.

At last the time came, and we went off to the theatre. My father explained the situation to M. Trafiloff, the manager, who said: 'Well, at any rate we will see what he looks like.'

While he rummaged in a chest which stood in a corner I stood gazing with delight at the dresses and costumes which hung round the walls.

'Come here, little one,' he said, and put a wig on my head. He stood back to look at me.

'It is good,' he said, 'just what I want.'

I felt rather silly in the wig, it wasn't very comfortable and I was afraid it would fall off.

Then they dressed me up in a girl's frock, and told me the few words I had to say. I repeated them until I knew them by heart.

Then my father came to me and told me to go on the stage and say my words as I would in the show.

As I walked out of the wings on to the stage I was so happy I nearly forgot about my few lines. I, Nicolai, was on a stage. I looked out into the empty auditorium and said my lines.

'Good, Nicolai,' said my father. I am sure I felt more pleased than the leading man in the show.

That afternoon, just before the play was due to start, my father took me to the back of the stage and asked the fireman there to look after me until I was wanted.

Here I stood, and gazed open-mouthed at the actors and actresses as they hurried to and fro. Every one seemed excited, and there was a great deal of noise. There were orders from Trafiloff, shouts from the dressers, and every one seemed to talk at once, no one seemed to listen.

'Poliakoff, come here at once.'

'Poliakoff, where's the curtain?'

It seemed to me that my father must be everywhere at once.

No one took any notice of me except my fireman, and he didn't speak unless I moved from where he had put me.

In one corner I could see the band tuning its instruments, and when the curtain sometimes blew aside a little, I caught glimpses of the people crowding into their seats. I thought the whole town had come. They moved and scraped their chairs, talking loudly among themselves, adding to the noise and clamour.

At last a bell rang loudly somewhere near me. My fireman told me that it was to warn the players that the play was about to start. The bell rang again, and all the players assembled at the back of the stage, ready to go on in their turn. The bell rang a third time, and the curtain went up almost at the same moment.

I held my breath with excitement. As the curtain went up the audience became very still and quiet. But when Trafiloff appeared in the middle of the stage they all clapped and cheered. He held up his hand.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I have much pleasure in presenting to you *The Bell*, a drama in four acts.'

How the audience clapped and cheered! Trafiloff disappeared at the back of the stage, and the curtain was lowered.

The bell rang for the last time. The curtain rose. The play had really started. One could have heard a pin drop.

I stood as close as I dared. I drank in every word, and watched every movement the players made. But all the time I felt I could hardly wait for the third act. Then I began to wonder if my wig would fall off. And did I know my

lines? I repeated them feverishly to myself. My legs ached, but I couldn't sit down.

Between the second and third acts my father came and asked me if I felt all right.

'Why, yes, father,' I said.

I could hear the audience applauding the second act. I imagined them applauding me, only even louder.

The curtain went up on the third act. My mouth felt dry. I felt my turn would never come. I pressed closer to the stage. I leant against the curtain and peered through the crack. I pushed nearer and nearer. Suddenly I fell through the curtain and on to the stage.

A large hand grabbed me by the back of my frock. I looked up into the angry face of my fireman. But all the time I could hear roars of laughter from the audience. M. Trafiloff, when he came round, was even angrier than the fireman.

'You, what do you think you are doing? You nearly spoilt the whole play. It's a good thing for you that the audience have taken it the right way.'

I felt sad and ashamed.

'I'm very sorry, sir. I was excited. I didn't know what I was doing.'

'Well, don't do it again. Get ready for your turn.'

I felt my wig to see if it was still on my head. I once more repeated my lines to myself. Then as though from a long way off I heard someone say: 'Are you ready, Nicolai? Do your best, little son.'

Then M. Trafiloff came to me with the jug that I was to carry on to the stage. He took my hand and led me to the players' entrance. 'On you go,' he said. 'Don't be frightened.'

I walked on to the stage. For a second I lifted my eyes and looked into the crowd of people. Then I said my lines and went off the stage.

It was over. I felt very tired. But I was happy because I had thought I heard people in the audience say: 'That wasn't a girl, that was Nicolai Poliakoff dressed up.' And I was proud that they should know me. But I don't know if they really said that or if I imagined it.

When the play was over the players gave me chocolate and sweets. My father said he was proud of me, and M. Trafiloff said: 'Well done, little one, you will make a good actor one day.'

After this I played several times with this troupe. Sometimes as a boy and sometimes as a girl. And once—the part I enjoyed more than any of the others—as a dwarf with a long beard.

## CHAPTER VI

### GOING TO RIGA

ABOUT a year after the events I have just been telling you about, when I was seven and a half, my father was out of work again. The winter had come earlier than usual, and already the snow lay two or three feet deep. We knew that before the winter was over there would be ten feet of snow over everything.

One night, when my father was mending some of our shoes, he looked round on us all, cold and hungry, and he said to my mother: 'We must move away to a larger town, where there may be more work.'

'We haven't any money,' said my mother, 'at least, not nearly enough for us all to go.'

They talked and argued for some time, and at last it was decided that my father should take myself and two other brothers and go to Riga, about ninety-five miles away.

Two days later, our few clothes in a bundle, we set off for the station. I was unhappy at leaving my mother, and I felt sure that I should never see her again. All the way to the station my tears fell on to the snow.

My father bought a ticket to Riga for himself,

and three platform tickets, so that at least we could get on to the train. He found an empty carriage, and we got in. My father sat down, and we three youngsters were pushed under the seat. For a minute or two, with the carriage empty, it wasn't so bad. But then it began to fill up, and we had to lie perfectly still, hardly daring to breathe.

At last the train started to move off, and there began the most uncomfortable journey of my life.

Under the seats, where we lay cramped and half choked with dust, were the pipes for heating the carriage. As the train went along these pipes got hotter and hotter. It was like being in an oven. How I longed to be cold.

At one station a man squeezed into the already full carriage, and started to push some bags under the seat where we were. I heard my father say: 'Not there, it's full up already.'

After much grumbling, the man found another place for his bags.

By now my two brothers were snoring, and very soon the heat and the rhythmic movement of the train sent me to sleep too.

We stayed there under the seats all night.

At nine o'clock next morning we pulled into Riga station. When all the people had left the carriage my father pulled us out. You can imagine what we must have looked like. Dust and perspiration had formed a paste on our faces; we must have looked like niggers with streaky

faces. We were so stiff and sore that we couldn't stand upright at all. Our clothes were filthy.

'Now,' said my father, 'you stand here on the platform until I fetch you.'

After a few minutes he came back and gave us each a platform ticket. We all walked to the barrier, gave up our tickets, and got out of the station.

My father said that nothing could be done until he had found a job. He left us in a shelter and told us to wait there until he came back for us. We must have looked a miserable little group.

It seemed hours that we waited there, tired, cold, and hungry. I was feeling very like crying when along came a man with an organ on his shoulder, and a small boy behind him carrying a carpet. A crowd of children were following them.

I said to my brothers: 'Let us follow them, and see what they are going to do.'

'No, Nicolai,' said Alexander, 'father told us to wait here.'

'I must just go and see what they are going to do,' I said, and, not listening to Alexander, I ran after them.

I followed the organ-grinder with the other children, up and down different streets. Then we came to the yard belonging to a big block of flats. Here the man and the boy stopped. The man set up his organ and began to play it. The boy placed his piece of carpet on the ground. Then he started to do all sorts of acrobatics.

I watched with envy and amazement. When he had finished the boy took off his cap to catch the money thrown to him from the windows.

Suddenly I realized that it was a long time since I had left my brothers. I had no idea where I was. I walked up and down streets trying to find the shelter where I had left them. But I couldn't find it. I was lost. I asked a man where the police station was, and he told me how to get there. When I got there I told a policeman what had happened.

'Come inside,' he said, 'there's a man here looking for a boy, it may be your father.'

He took me into a room in the police station and there was my father. How thankful I was to see him. I threw myself into his arms and wept for joy and relief.

'Nicolai, you rascal, we have searched the town for you,' he said.

I told him what had happened. He scolded me, but not very much.

My father told me that he had found a job, also somewhere to live.

The house where we were to live was a long way from the police station and it was dark before we got there. It was a very old wooden house, and not at all like our house in Dvinsk. A baker and his wife lived there. It had only three rooms, and one of these was given up to a large oven, used for baking bread. We were to sleep on top of the oven.

The baker's wife gave us some blankets and

pillows to put on the oven, and we were soon ready for bed.

I listened to the snores and heavy breathing of my father and brothers, but I couldn't go to sleep myself. I lay awake and imagined myself doing the same acrobatics as the boy had done. Just before I at last fell asleep I said to myself: 'I must try, I must try, I *must* be an acrobat.'

## CHAPTER VII

### AN ORGAN-GRINDER AND HIS BOY

SEVEN months later, my father, who was working as a shoe-maker, had saved enough money to send for my mother and my other brothers and sisters.

The day they were to arrive, my father left his little shop and took us down to the station to meet them. We could hardly believe we were to see them again after all those long months of separation. I did not know how to keep still for excitement while I was waiting for the train to come in.

But at last they arrived. How happy we were to be together again. My mother could not stop exclaiming at how I and my brothers had grown. I kept very close to her and kept looking at her face. We were all very happy.

It was the middle of summer now and very hot indeed. At school it was almost unbearable. All the windows were open, but still we sat and baked. We didn't think at all about our lessons. All we thought of was when it would be two o'clock. Every day at two o'clock the teachers marched us down to the River Dvina to swim for an hour. Oh, the lovely coolness of the water after the hot class-room.

I was a good swimmer, and loved to show the other children how good I was. Every day, before we went in to swim, they would shout: 'Nicolai! Show us your tricks!'

Then I would do the acrobatics I had been practising. I loved the children to see how clever I was. I would do all my tricks, and they would laugh and clap, and then, hot and tired, we would all tumble into the river.

One morning, when I was on my way to school, I saw again the organ-grinder and his boy. It seemed a wonderful opportunity, and at once I made up my mind to follow them and persuade them to give me a job.

All day I followed them, and watched every performance they gave. I did not feel tired or hungry, and I had no idea where I was. When it was beginning to get dark I heard them decide to go home. I thought I had better follow them and see where they lived.

When we had walked about five miles we came to the outskirts of the town. Just opposite a cemetery they stopped at a tumbledown house and went into it.

I was alone. I felt suddenly tired and hungry. A little shiver of fear made me tremble. My father would certainly beat me when I got home, and I should get another beating at school. And anyway I didn't know where home was. I decided I must wait here until the organ man came out in the morning and then ask him for a job.

I sat all night on the cemetery wall. I felt safer off the ground. But the nights were very cold, and I daren't move about among those ghostly tombstones to keep myself warm.

At last, after a long and miserable night, the darkness began to turn grey, and then daylight came. I jumped down, and ran among the graves, laughing at myself, and wondering how I could have felt frightened. When I was really warm I stopped running. I felt very empty, and for the first time realized how hungry I was.

While I was wondering how I could get some food, the organ-grinder and his boy came out of the house. I forgot my hunger at once, and followed them down the road. I noticed that the boy carried a box, and I wondered what was in it.

I walked a little faster and came closer to them. Then I edged closer still. At last I plucked up enough courage to ask the man if I could carry the box for him. He was angry with me, and told me to go away.

I followed until they came into the town and started to give their first show. I saw that the box was really a cage and had a bird in it. It was fixed on to a pole which they pushed into the ground. At the bottom of the cage was a shelf, with little pieces of folded paper lying on it. I saw people go up to the box and put three copecks into the cage. Then the bird would pick up a piece of paper in its beak and push it through the bars. I picked up a piece of paper that

someone had thrown down, and saw that it had a 'fortune' written on it.

As soon as they were ready to move on, I asked the man again if he wanted any help.

'Go away. We don't want any bother from you,' he said.

So I just followed along behind them.

At dinner time they went into a café and sat down at a table by the window. I stood on the other side of the road and watched them eat. I was so hungry. My mouth watered, and I wanted to cry.

By the time they came out of the café I was desperate. I went up to the man.

'Oh, please take me with you, sir. I can work. I'll carry your box. I'll do anything if only you'll take me with you.'

He stopped and looked me over.

'Who are you? Where do you come from? And why do you keep bothering me?'

'I have no parents and nowhere to live. I must find a job. I can do acrobatics like your boy—better than your boy. *Please* take me with you.'

At this the boy pushed forward. 'So you can do better than me, eh? Let's see what you can do.' He unrolled his carpet in the road.

I took off my jacket, and there in the street I did all the tricks I had seen the boy do, and I added a few more of my own. When I had finished I thought the man looked pleased.

'All right, you can come with us,' he said.

He gave me the cage with the bird to carry. When we had finished for the day the man told me I could go home with them. They fed me and gave me a blanket to sleep on in the corner of their room. As I went off to sleep I thought: 'At last I'm a real acrobat.'

I was very happy. I didn't even think of my father and mother.

I learnt later that there were many other organ men in the house. They all worked for one man, a Persian, and they had to hand over their day's takings to him.

Next morning we had tea and black bread for breakfast. Then I was given a pair of black tights and a silk blouse to wear. How proud I was of that costume! And a real artiste at last, I set off with them for the day's work.

Every day we toured a different part of the town. After some time I realized that soon we should be going to the part where I lived. This made me very frightened and I decided that I should have to leave the show. But I had no money, and I dare not go home. All day I worried about this.

At last I thought I would ask the organ man for some money. I told him that I had lodgings in the town and owed them some money. I said that if I had ten copecks I could pay the woman and get the costumes I had left there. The man believed me. When we got home that night he gave me the money and told me to go and get my things.

## CHAPTER VIII

### A JOURNEY UNDER A SEAT

WHEN I got out of the house I felt lost. Again I had nowhere to go. I walked down the road, wondering what to do and where to go. I saw the lights of the railway station.

Suddenly I made up my mind. I would take the first train that came along and go to some other town.

I bought a cup of tea outside the station, and a loaf of black bread to eat in the train. Then I got a platform ticket and walked past the barrier to the platform. I sat down on a seat and ate some of my bread. I wondered how long I should have to wait for a train.

In quite a short time I heard a whistle in the distance. My heart beat rapidly with excitement. Then the lights of a train appeared round a corner, came nearer, and the train puffed into the station.

I found an empty carriage, and looking round to make sure that nobody saw me, I got in. I was just going to crawl straight under the seat, when I remembered the dust. So this time I cleared a space as best I could. I also took my hat off. Then I crawled under and made myself as comfortable as I could.

Before the train started, several people climbed into the carriage. But this time I was lucky, and no one tried to put any bags under the seat. I wondered, as the train started, what was in store for me, but I did not worry very much, and soon I was fast asleep.

It was daylight when I woke up. I saw that a lot more people had got into the carriage. From my place under the seat, all I could see was a forest of legs. Legs of all sizes and shapes. I felt very stiff, and the longing to stretch myself was an agony. I was hungry too. I remembered my bread, and after much trouble I managed to get it out of my pocket. That was my breakfast.

The train stopped at several stations, and people got out. Then there was only one person, a woman, left in my carriage. Suddenly she said: 'Come out, little boy, I've seen you for a long time.'

I didn't move. I was too frightened, because I thought she would call the guard.

'Come along,' she said, 'I want to see who you are.'

I clambered out. The woman looked at me in astonishment. Indeed I must have looked a pretty scarecrow.

'Who are you and where are you going?' she said.

I was afraid to say that I was running away, so instead of answering her question I asked her where the train was going.

'It is going to Vitebsk,' she said. Looking at

her watch, she told me that it would get there in about an hour and a half.

'How far is that from Riga?' I asked her.

'About three hundred miles.'

I was pleased to hear this, because I knew that no one there could possibly know me.

'Why are you going to Vitebsk? You are very young to be travelling alone.'

'I'm nearly nine,' I said. 'I'm going to join a circus.' I puffed out my chest and drew myself up as tall as I could.

The woman smiled at me. 'Sit down and be comfortable,' she said.

She opened a bag. 'Are you hungry?'

My mouth began to water. 'Yes, please, madame.'

She gave me a sandwich and an apple. I tried to make them last as long as possible, but how quickly they seemed to go.

Presently, after passing through the outskirts of a small town, the train started to slow up.

'This is Vitebsk. The train doesn't go any further,' said the woman.

When the train stopped she collected her bags and got out. Turning round, she said: 'Good-bye, little one, and good luck.'

Then she was swallowed up in the crowd of other passengers. I felt sad to see her go, and tears came into my eyes.

But I had to think how I was going to get out of the station without a ticket. I got out of the train and looked round. And then I had an idea.

At the far end of the platform I saw some high railings. On the other side of the railings were some boys playing. I walked down the platform and started to play on my side of the railings, calling to the boys. I soon heard a shout, and turning round, saw a porter coming towards me.

'Hi, you young rascal, playing on the platform! How did you get here? Now go on back to the other side.'

I smiled up at him. 'I can't get back,' I said.

'We'll soon see about that,' said the porter.

With that he picked me up by the seat of my trousers, and with a swing, dropped me over the other side of the railings among the other children.

'Now don't let me ever catch you over here again.'

I picked myself up, and asked one of the children the way into the town. He told me, and I set off.

I was soon in the middle of the town. The streets were full of people, bustling hither and thither. I was jostled and pushed about all over the place. Suddenly I felt very small and lonely. I would have given anything to be able to run back to my father and mother. I suddenly realized what they meant to a nine-year-old boy.

That night I slept in an old shed. The nights were very cold, and the shed was cold and draughty. I lay on an old piece of sacking and pulled a piece over me to try and keep warm. As I lay there I could see the stars shining through

a crack in the roof. They made me think how big the world was, and how very small I was. I hugged the piece of sacking and tried to pretend it was my mother. With the tears trickling slowly down my face I fell asleep.

## CHAPTER IX

LAZERENKO

IN the morning I left my shed, and went out and bought some cakes. These served me for breakfast.

As I wandered through the streets I saw placards advertising a circus which was playing in the district. I felt that I must get to the circus at once.

I asked several people the way and eventually I got there. But to my great disappointment all I could see was the tops of the tents, as there was a high fence round the ground. I walked round the fence until I found a door in it. To my delight this door was open. I poked my head round the door and saw a boy feeding some horses. Plucking up my courage, I went up and asked him if he wanted any help.

'Get hold of that bag and fill it with hay,' he said.

Feeling very pleased with myself, I did as he told me. Rather nervously I began asking him questions about the circus, and what he did in it. Rather to my surprise he answered my questions, and told me that all he did was to look after the horses. Feed them three times a day, groom them, and look after the harness. After a little

while he asked me if I would like to look round the circus. I could hardly believe my ears; this was more than I had hoped for.

While we went round the circus, I became more and more determined that I must see the show that night.

'Could you *possibly* let me see the show?' I said. 'I haven't any money, but I *do* want to see it.'

'Well, perhaps I might take you up into the gallery with me just before the show starts. But you'll have to come and help me clean my harness first.'

'I'd do anything to see the show to-night,' I said.

I helped my new friend all the rest of the day, and as the hours passed my excitement mounted higher and higher. At last the time came. 'Come on,' said my friend, and off we went to the entrance.

The man at the entrance let us in without a word. High up into the gallery we went, until at last my friend said: 'This is where we sit.'

I sat fidgeting until the show started.

I sat with my mouth open, amazed and delighted. This was the most wonderful thing that had ever happened to me. I was so awed that I forgot to applaud the turns. There were jugglers, girls on horseback, trapeze artistes, tumblers, all the things that go to make the circus the most popular attraction in the world. I forgot that I was a small, homeless boy, with

nowhere to sleep; forgot everything except that I was seeing a circus.

Suddenly a loud noise from the band awakened me from my dreams. Looking up, I saw that the ring was empty. The ring master was announcing: 'Lazerenko. The most famous clown in all the Russias.'

Before he had finished speaking I thought that Lazerenko must be the most famous clown in all the world. But I couldn't see him.

Suddenly he appeared on top of the bandstand. With a shout he dived headlong down into the ring. He was followed by a seemingly endless stream of old pots and pans, which made an ear-splitting clatter as they crashed into the ring. Lazerenko sat amongst these with such a pained expression on his comical face, that the circus rocked with laughter. But I didn't laugh. I was wondering how he managed to fall so far without hurting himself.

I cannot remember all the things he did, but I know he gave a wonderful exhibition of clowning. When it was over I made up my mind that I was going to be a clown and nothing else.

I did not know then, of course, that Lazerenko was to become one of the most famous jumpers in the circus world. In 1914 he was doing a turn which entailed jumping over three elephants. Political satire, also, has always played a big part in Lazerenko's clowning.

My companion nudged me. 'Come along, it's all over.'

We made our way back to the stables, and my friend said he was going to bed. I remembered then that I had to find somewhere to sleep.

I left the ground and made my way to a public park near by. Here I found a bandstand. I crawled underneath it and made myself as comfortable as I could.

I was awake at daybreak. I found my way to a river. Here I had a wash and tidied myself up a bit. All the time I was wondering if I could get a job in the circus.

When I got back to the circus I went and found my friend of the stables.

'What, back again?' he said.

'Yes. I was wondering if I could get a job here.'

'Well, I can't give you one. You'll have to see the manager.' I heard a noise over in the ring, and wandered there to see if I could find any one. I had no sooner poked my head inside when someone grabbed me by the arm.

'You don't belong here, what are you doing?'

'Please, sir, I want to be an artiste, please won't you give me a job?' And then I started to cry.

'What's the matter, little one, are you hungry?'

'No,' I said, 'all I want is a job. Please take me with the circus.'

'Come and have some tea and something to eat at the café,' said the manager.

How I enjoyed that meal. After I had eaten

as much as I could, the man began to ask me questions. I was afraid to say that I had run away from home, so I said: 'Please, I have no home and no parents. I *must* join the circus, please let me.'

'But what can you do?'

'I can sing and dance, and I can tumble,' I said proudly, and I told him all about the organ man.

'That's all very well, but wouldn't you be better off at school?'

'No, no, don't send me to school!' I cried.

'Well, well, I'll have to see what I can do for you. Come with me.'

He set off for the ring, and I followed him eagerly. He took me to a man sitting beside the ring.

'Here, Lazerenko, here's a boy for you. He says he *must* join the circus!'

I had not recognized Lazerenko without his make-up.

'What do you want to do?' said Lazerenko.

'Please, sir, I want to be a clown.'

'It is a very hard life, and anyway what do you know about clowning?'

'I don't care how hard it is. I *must* be a clown. I can dance and tumble and do acrobatics.'

'All right,' said Lazerenko, 'let me see what you can do.'

I smiled so broadly I felt as if my face was splitting. First I danced, and then I sang one

or two songs, including *Tusa, Tusa*. Then I did all the acrobatics I could think of. I ended on a somersault and sat panting and exhausted in the ring.

'Start again,' said Lazerenko.

Once again I did all my turns.

'Not so bad, I think I can make something of you.'

'You mean I can be a clown?' I cried.

'Not so fast, young man, it takes a long time and lots of very hard work to become a clown. Now I have some business to attend to, wait here for me.'

When he had gone, a great many people came into the ring, and asked me a lot of questions. When I told them that I was going to be a clown they all laughed. 'Come on, show us what you can do,' they cried.

For the third time that morning I did my singing, dancing, and tumbling.

'Bravo, bravo!' the people cried, and I felt as proud as if I were a famous clown already.

While we were all laughing and talking the manager came in.

'Come along, all of you, it's time for rehearsal,' he said.

Presently Lazerenko came back and said he would take me into the town. As we walked along the road he asked me my name.

'Nicolai Poliakoff,' I said.

'Are you *sure* you haven't any parents?'

'Yes, I'm all alone.'

We went into a shop and Lazerenko bought me a blouse, trousers, a jacket, and a cap. I had never been in such a grand shop before, and I didn't want to leave it.

'Come along, you must have some new shoes.'

So we went and bought some shoes.

I expect I was rather tired, but I was beginning to feel I was in a dream. I prayed that I shouldn't wake up yet.

'Now we will go to my house and have some dinner.'

When we got there, Lazerenko took me to the landlady.

'We've got another lodger,' he said. 'He wants some dinner and a bed.'

After we had eaten our dinner, Lazerenko said that he was going to have a sleep. I asked him if I might go for a walk in the town.

'Yes,' he replied, 'but be back in time for tea.'

I went out, feeling very proud of my new clothes. As I walked along I kept telling myself that I was a clown at last. It was a good thing I couldn't see what I had to go through before I *did* become an established clown.

What a tea I ate when I got back. It was a long time since I had eaten a tea like that. When I had finished my skin felt tight and I could hardly move.

'If you always eat like that,' laughed Lazerenko, 'you'll soon get too fat to be a clown.'

That evening I had a good view of the circus.

Lazerenko put me in a seat just by the artistes' entrance, and I saw everything. To me, there was no doubt that Lazerenko was the most important person in the circus, and I was determined that one day I would be as good as he.

## CHAPTER X

### AN ARTISTE'S REWARD

THE bed I slept in that night felt to me the warmest and most comfortable in the world. But I couldn't go to sleep. I lay thinking of circuses and clowns. Presently Lazerenko said: 'Nicolai, why aren't you asleep?'

'I can't,' I replied.

'Once I had a son, like you, Nicolai. My wife and I thought the world of him. He caught the fever and died. My wife used to be a famous trapeze artiste, and in those days we used to do a turn together. One day while she was practising on the trapeze she fell. We took her to hospital, but she died next day. I thought I could not go on living without my wife and son. But it is life. I decided that I would be a clown instead of a trapeze artiste, and here I am. But I cannot forget my wife and son. I take you, Nicolai, and I will make you as my son.'

I buried my face in my pillow and cried. When Lazerenko spoke again I pretended I was asleep and didn't answer. I didn't want him to think that I was a baby.

When we went into the ring next morning, Lazerenko said: 'Nicolai, I have a new turn I want to give. You must help me.'

We practised the turn until at last Lazerenko pronounced it perfect.

I was so excited at the thought that I was actually going to take part in the show that I did not know how I could pass the time until the evening. But at last evening came, and at last the show started. And then the time went all too quickly, and then came our turn.

It seemed to be a great success. The crowd were still cheering some time after Lazerenko and I had run out of the exit. I was pleased and happy, and felt I had taken the first step towards becoming a famous clown.

One day Lazerenko was asked to give a performance at a children's hospital. He told me that I could go too. He made up my face and gave me a costume. As my face was never seen properly in our turn together, it was the first time I had seen myself made up as a clown. When I looked in the mirror I couldn't believe it was me. I burst out laughing.

During the five minutes it took us to get to the hospital, I tried to think of all the things I could do to make the children laugh. And we did make them laugh. So much so, that we could hardly get away to get back to the circus.

On the way back, I asked Lazerenko why we should have to go to a hospital and work.

'Wait until you grow up and are a real clown. Maybe you 'll understand then.'

And I had to be content with that.

Several times Lazerenko had asked me if I

had any papers. In Russia every one had to carry a birth certificate as a sort of passport. Of course mine was at home with my father. Lazerenko said: 'We shall have to get you some papers.'

This frightened me. We should have to go to the police station, and they would probably find out all about me. And perhaps Lazerenko would get into trouble for taking me without any papers. I began to think it was time I left this circus.

It would be nice, too, I thought, to see my father and mother again. I decided to leave the circus and go back to Riga.

But how was I to get there? I should have to earn some money. I collected my few possessions, and walked about the town, wondering how I could earn some money. Then I saw a young man going from café to café playing a concertina. I waited for him to come out of a café, and then I went up to him.

'Do you want a partner to help you?'

He laughed. 'What can *you* do?'

'What can I do? Why, I'm an artiste, I've worked in a circus. I can sing and dance and do acrobatics.'

'Well, you can come into the next café and see what you can do.'

Off we went to another café, and we went in. First the young man played his concertina, then I sang and danced, and took off my jacket and did my acrobatics. I seemed to please the patrons of the café, for they clapped and applauded.

Then I took my hat round and collected the money.

When we were outside, my companion said: 'The two of us can make quite a lot of money.'

When we had visited a few more cafés I saw that it was getting dark. I decided I must go to the station. I told my companion that I had to go now. I arranged to meet him next morning, so that we could go round the cafés again. He shared out the money with me, and I made my way to the station as fast as I could.

To my dismay when I inquired there, I found that I hadn't got enough money to take me to Riga. So I decided that I might as well save some of it, and I bought a ticket to a town about two stations from Vitebsk.

In a little while I caught a train. When we reached this station I didn't get out, but crawled under the seat, just as I had done before, and stayed there until the train got to Riga.

I forgot how I got out of the station without a ticket, but I managed it somehow. I walked very slowly towards my home. What would they say, I wondered. I knew my father would beat me. Even when I got to the house it was a long time before I could gather enough courage to knock.

At last I knocked on the door. I waited breathlessly. It was opened by my mother. For a long time she stared at me. Then she began to cry.

'Nicolai, we thought you dead. Oh, where have you been?'

We went into the house, and my brothers and sisters looked at me in astonishment. I must have looked like a dirty scarecrow.

'Wash yourself properly, and then come and tell me where you have been,' said my mother.

While I was washing my mother prepared me some food. When I had finished eating I told her all my adventures. After a long silence she said: 'Well, Nicolai, I shouldn't like to be you when your father comes home.'

I had that feeling myself. As the time drew near for my father to come home I became more and more nervous. I sat in a corner biting my nails, and fidgeting. When at last he walked in it was almost a relief.

He only gave me one glance, and said: 'I'll deal with you when I've finished my tea.'

Once more I sat in suspense.

When he had finished his tea, my father said: 'Come here, young man.'

As he spoke he removed his leather belt. Placing me across his knee, he gave me such a beating as I have never had before or since.

When it was over he said: 'Now sit down here, and tell me where you have been.'

But I could not sit down, neither then nor for a long time afterwards.

When I had told my father everything, he said: 'Well, no more circus for you. To-morrow you go back to school, and there you will stay.'

## CHAPTER XI

### APPRENTICE TO TRUZI

ALL that winter I went to school, but I'm afraid that I didn't learn much. I never thought of anything but the circus. I wondered what Lazerenko was doing, and I wished with all my heart that I had stayed with him.

The winter passed, and the spring came and still I was at school. At last I could stand it no longer. I went to my father and begged him to let me join another circus.

For a long time he would not listen, but I kept asking him. At last he agreed to let me go to one at Mitau. This was about thirty miles from Riga. I wondered what had made my father change his mind, but I was so pleased about it that this didn't worry me.

One night when I came home from school, my father told me that he had been to Mitau, and that I was to go there to join the Circus Isako next week.

I was very excited and could hardly wait for the time to come. But at last the day came, and saying good-bye to my mother, and to my brothers and sisters, I set off with father to the station.

When we arrived at Mitau we went straight to the circus. I was disappointed when I saw

it. It was very small, and not a bit like the one I had left at Vitebsk. Still, it was a circus, and that was all that really concerned me.

We went into the circus, and my father took me up to a man and introduced me. The man was an Italian.

'You must do your best, and work for him,' he said.

Then my father said good-bye to me, wished me luck, and set off for Riga. In spite of that beating, I was sad when I saw him go.

The Italian took me to his home, which was quite close to the circus. His wife showed me my bedroom. It was a dirty, cold little room, right up at the top of the house, and nothing in it except a bed and a chair.

I did not sleep very well that night. I couldn't stop thinking of the circus, and wondering what it would be like.

In the morning the man came and woke me.

'Come on, get up, there's work for you to do, my boy.'

'What, in the circus?' I said, jumping out of bed.

'No. Here.'

When I got downstairs, he gave me a pile of dirty dishes to wash.

'When you have done these you can have some breakfast.'

This wasn't quite what I had expected, but as I was hungry I started on the dishes, and soon finished them. Then I was given my breakfast,

which consisted of a mug of tea and a piece of black bread. When I had finished I was made to wash up the breakfast things.

As I was finishing, the woman came back again. I asked her where her husband was. She told me that he had gone to the circus.

'But why hasn't he taken me?' I cried.

'Never mind that. You stay here and do as you are told.'

For a fortnight I didn't see the circus. I washed up until I was sick of the sight of dirty dishes. When the woman went shopping I had to go and carry the parcels. If the baby cried I had to nurse it and keep it quiet. I began to despair of ever seeing the circus.

One day, to my surprise, my father arrived.

'Well, Nicolai, how do you like the circus?' he said.

'I love it, father, they are teaching me to be a great artiste.'

He took my arm gently.

'Come along, son, we will go home now.'

'Go home?' I said, 'I don't want to go home. I want to stay near the circus.'

My father looked at me.

'Listen, Nicolai, I brought you here hoping that you would be cured of your passion to be a circus artiste, but I see that it is useless, quite useless. Well, we'll go home now, and then you can join a really big circus.'

And so, with my heart dancing with joy and gratitude, we went home to Riga.

While I had been away, a big circus had come to Riga. It was the Circus Rudolpho Truzi, and it was here that my father had decided that I should serve an apprenticeship.

The next day we went to see Truzi. As I looked round I could see that this really *was* a circus. It was bigger than the one at Vitebsk. We were shown into an office, and there sat Signor Truzi and his wife. He was an Italian, but his wife was a Russian.

My father explained why we had come, and they were both very nice to me. They were very much surprised that I had already been with two circuses. At last everything was settled. For four years I was to be apprenticed to Signor Truzi. For the first three years I was to receive training, food, and clothing, but no wages. The fourth year I was to receive a small wage. At the end of that time I should be able to take my place as an artiste.

## CHAPTER XII

### A BOY IN A CIRCUS

I FELT that life really started for me that day. I was part of the circus. To be sure, I was the youngest and most insignificant part, but there I was.

We stayed in Riga all the winter, and I used to go and see my parents every day.

There were four other apprentices besides myself. I got on well with all of them except the eldest one. At first he disliked me, and wouldn't speak to me because I was so young. I didn't mind this, though; all I cared about was being in the circus.

We all lived together in lodgings in the town. Every morning we had to get up at six o'clock and be at the circus at seven. I was given all sorts of jobs—helping with the horses, cleaning the ring, mending ropes.

Then one day Truzi told me that I was to start my proper training.

'First of all you must learn to be an acrobat and to work on the trapeze,' he said.

'But I don't want to be an acrobat, I want to be a clown,' I said.

'My boy, if you want to be a successful clown

first you must be an acrobat, then a trapeze artiste and a tumbler; in fact you must be able to do everything, and *then* you can think about being a clown.'

At first I thought that this was rather silly, but when I saw how the other clowns practised, I came to see that Truzi was right.

Every morning we would hurry into our practice clothes, and then we would line up in a row, ready for Rudolpho Truzi to inspect us. After this the day's work would begin. We had to learn how to tumble, we had to learn to ride; we had to learn trapeze work, juggling, and, in fact, nearly every one of the arts of the circus. We started work on a miniature trapeze or wire near the ground, and then, as our work improved, the apparatus would be moved higher and higher. The finished apprentices would work high up in the big top. How we smaller ones envied them!

During the summer the circus was divided into two parts. Each part toured a different part of the country. There were two other apprentices besides myself in the circus I went with. We had a very happy time. The hours were long and the work was hard, but we didn't mind that. At each show one of us had to take a small part in the ring. It was really only more training, but we loved this. It gave us a chance of showing what we had learned, and it made us feel like real artistes.

We had a bear act with us—a baby bear and his trainer, a man called Bono. One day, having

been sent to the stables to chop wood, I couldn't see the chopper. Then I saw it just inside the little bear's cage. Quite without thinking I opened the door to get the chopper. And then I saw the little bear running towards the door.

I turned and ran; the bear after me. I was so frightened that I didn't realize he only wanted to play with me, and wasn't nearly big enough to hurt me. In and out of the stalls I went, expecting all the time that I should feel his claws in my back. At last I found myself in the ring. But I went on running. Suddenly just by my ear there was a furious shout.

'Who has let that bear out?' It was Bono himself.

'Please, sir, it was I.'

Without another word Bono seized hold of me and gave me a terrible beating with a stick he always carried.

'That will teach you not to let any more bears out,' he said. And picking up the bear he carried it back to its cage.

I got up cautiously and felt myself all over. Suddenly I heard a shout of laughter. The two apprentices were looking at me and laughing until they cried. For a long time they kept reminding me that I had run away from a baby bear.

One day at Revel, while we were waiting for the trapeze artiste who was to give us a lesson, Gingek, the eldest of the apprentices, took some cigarettes out of his pocket and offered me one. I told him I was too young to smoke, and that

anyway it wasn't allowed. He lit one himself, and said that I was a silly baby. When we heard the artiste coming Gingek stubbed out his cigarette. The artiste at once asked who had been smoking. Looking at me, he said: 'Was it you?'

'No,' I said.

'Who was it?' he said.

There was a pause, and then I said: 'It was Gingek.'

The artiste warned us about smoking, and said he would beat us if he caught us at it again.

Some days later we were again waiting for this trapeze artiste. Gingek started to smoke again. I told him that he was foolish, but he only laughed.

When the artiste came, he was very angry, and asked again who had been smoking. At once Gingek said: 'It was Nicolai.'

'Oh, sir, I don't smoke,' I cried, 'I haven't got any cigarettes.'

'We'll see about that,' he said, and began to feel in my pockets.

'Oh, you don't smoke?' he said, as he pulled a packet out of my jacket pocket.

I tried to explain that they weren't mine, but he wouldn't listen. And then he beat me until I could hardly stand. Then he made me do my exercises on the trapeze.

One day, when we were walking in the town, and playing about, I accidentally broke a window.

'Now you've done it,' said Gingek. 'You'll certainly get a beating from Truzi himself.'

I was terribly frightened and began to cry.  
'Please don't tell Truzi,' I asked them.

Gingek only laughed. 'You told of me smoking so I shall tell Truzi.'

All the way home they laughed and told me of the terrible beating I would get.

At last I could bear it no longer, and I ran off and left them. I was too frightened to go back to the circus. I didn't know what to do. I decided that I had better go back to a town we had just left, where I had heard there was a fair. So once more I made my way to the station.

## CHAPTER XIII

### I RUN AWAY

AFTER I had bought my ticket I only had five copecks left.

I boarded the train, and soon it arrived. I went immediately to the fair ground. It looked quite different to when I had been there before. They had built a theatre and a horse ring, and it was all decorated with flags and bunting. I wondered what it was all for. I asked a man, and he told me that it was the Annual Fair and Horse Show—a great event in the life of the town.

I walked round looking at everything. Presently I came to the theatre. Outside there was a crowd of artistes, singing and dancing. On top of a big box stood the manager, persuading the crowd to come and see the show.

'Ladies and gentlemen, the biggest show in all the Russias. We have played in Moscow, St Petersburg, Kharkov, and all the most important towns in the country. Come along! You have never seen anything like it before.'

When the people were slowly trickling in to see the show, I plucked up courage to go and speak to the manager. I looked up at him.

'Sir, I'm an artiste, and I want a job,' I said.

He looked down at me in surprise.

'Run away, little monkey, your face wants washing,' he said.

'Sir, I *am* an artiste, please give me a job.'

'What can you do, little monkey?'

'I can sing and dance and do acrobatics. I'm a clown. I've worked in a circus.'

He looked a little more interested.

'Have you any costumes?'

'No,' I said sadly.

'Any make-up?'

I felt my chances of a job slipping away.

'Yes, sir,' I lied quickly.

He scratched his head, looking at me doubtfully. Then, perhaps because he thought I might be a novelty, he said: 'Well, come along, I might be able to find you some clothes.'

Shivering with excitement, I followed him into a sort of dressing-room.

'Make up your face while I go and look for some clothes,' he said, and left the room.

I was so miserable I wished I were dead. I started to cry and looked desperately round the room. Just as I was going to run away I thought I saw some pots under the table. I looked again. Yes, paint pots, but ordinary house paint. But paint—red, white, and green paint! I found a sliver of wood on the floor and a small piece of mirror on the table, and was at once hard at work painting my face.

Just as I finished the manager came back.

'Not bad, little monkey, not bad,' he said.

'Put some of these on, go outside, and let's see what you can do.'

I picked out of the bundle an old pair of plaid trousers, a bright yellow waistcoat, and a tattered old uniform coat that had belonged to an attendant. I perched an old top hat on my head and was ready.

First I danced and sang. Then I did some acrobatics. This made the crowd laugh, because I kept falling over the ends of my trousers. Then I tried some of the jokes and gags I had learned in the Truzi Circus. I did my very best, because I knew that my chances of getting a job depended on my success here.

The manager mounted his box again.

'Ladies and gentlemen, this is nothing. For only five copecks you can see the real show. Just think—the finest show in the world for only five copecks.'

The people seemed to believe him, for soon they were crowding into the theatre. The manager took me into the theatre.

'Can you do anything else?' he said. 'Anything on the stage?'

'Of course I can,' I replied happily. 'Just let me go on to the stage and I will show you what I can do.'

'Well, you can go on as the last turn, but mind you're a success.'

When I went on to the stage I danced and sang and tumbled, and did the things that Lazerenko had done and that I had practised so hard. I

think the audience liked me. They clapped and cheered me. I was overjoyed—especially when the manager said: 'You 're a good little monkey. You can do your turn at every performance.'

Thirteen times that day I did my turn. By the time the last performance was over my body ached all over, and every bone hurt. My throat was so sore I could hardly speak.

The artistes all crowded into the dressing-room, and started to take off their costumes and remove their make-up. I stood in a corner by myself. By now the paint on my face had got stiff and uncomfortable, and I did not know how to set about getting it off.

'What 's the matter with you? Why don't you change your clothes?' said one of the artistes.

'I 'm tired,' I said, and my voice trembled. 'I 'll rest a little while, and then I will.'

The manager put his head round the door and spoke to one of the artistes. Then he saw me. 'You have done well. Come again to-morrow.' And he turned to go.

I ran up to him. 'But . . . please, my pay?' I said desperately.

He looked at me considering. 'Where are you lodging?'

'I will find a lodging,' I said.

He felt about in his pocket. 'Here you are,' and he gave me fifty copecks—worth about a shilling in English money.

I thanked him, and my mouth began to water as I thought of buying some food.

When every one had gone, I found a bucket of water and some soap, and started to wash my face. I washed and scrubbed it until it was sore, but I got very little of the paint off. At last, feeling so hungry and so tired, I decided that the paint would have to stay on my face. So I left it and went out to the market.

I bought some fruit and some cakes, and took them back to the dressing-room of the theatre. I sat down on the floor and started to eat hungrily.

Before I had finished eating, a night watchman came in. He asked me who I was and what I was doing there. I told him I hadn't got a bed for that night.

'Oh, so it's like that, is it?' he said, and questioned me as to where I came from and what I had been doing.

At last I told him the whole story—of how I got into trouble, how the boys didn't like me, and how I had run away from the Circus Truzi. Then I put my head down on my arms and sobbed.

The watchman patted my shoulder kindly. 'All right, little one, you can sleep here.'

He gave me his sheepskin coat to keep me warm, and soon I was sound asleep.

Next morning I was awakened by someone shaking me hard. Looking up sleepily I saw the night watchman and with him a policeman. I jumped up in terror.

'Now, now, Nicolai, it is all right. This good policeman will take you back to the Circus Truzi.'

I felt sad and bitter. 'How could he have known? You must have told him about me.'

'Listen, Nicolai,' said the watchman, 'it is better that you should go back to your own circus. If you stay with a show like this you 'll never be anything better than a gipsy. You want to be a *real* artiste, don't you?'

'Yes, but . . .'

'Then go with this policeman, back to your circus. One day, when you are a great artiste, you will remember and thank me for this.'

'All right,' I said, 'I 'll go back.'

First we went to the police station, and then we took the train for Revel. All the way there I wondered what Truzi would do to me. I felt sick with fright, and could not eat any of the food offered me by the kind policeman.

At Revel he took me to the circus, and I was taken straight to Rudolpho Truzi and his wife. I stood waiting, my eyes on the floor, wondering how much the beating would hurt me.

'Come here, Nicolai, why did you run away? Don't you like my circus? Aren't people kind to you? Tell me, what 's the matter?'

I could hardly believe what I heard. Perhaps there would be no beating. I stood, twisting my hands, and at last I said: 'I don't know why I ran away, nobody was unkind to me. Please, sir, I *love* the circus.' I burst into tears.

'There, Nicolai, we want you to stay here. You are a silly boy to run away for nothing. You will never be a great artiste if you keep running away.'

You must learn to be a man and to take things as they come, patiently.'

Between my sobs I thanked them as best I could, and ran off to find the other apprentices.

And the night watchman was right. I have always remembered him with gratitude. If it hadn't been for him, goodness knows what would have happened to me, or where I should have been now.

## CHAPTER XIV

### A STORM IN VILNO

AT the end of the last performance in Revel, we apprentices were so excited we didn't know what to do with ourselves. The circus was going to Vilno.

The Circus Truzi was the biggest of its kind in Russia in those days. From Revel to Vilno was over four hundred miles, and the whole circus was to be transported by a special train. This meant a great deal of work for everybody. There were one hundred and twenty-five horses, and the five other apprentices and myself had to lead these to the station and hand them over to the grooms, who then got them on to the train.

It seemed as if the whole town had gathered at the station to watch the work. The crowds would roar with laughter at the many little accidents that are bound to happen when a circus entrains. One of the horses took an instant dislike to the train, and it was over two hours before it was coaxed into it. And then one of the bears got loose. He was only caught after he had climbed on to the top of the station and got stuck there.

On the afternoon of the second day we were ready. Soon we were pulling out of the station, the crowd cheering lustily. I loved that journey.

I seemed to have passed so many journeys hidden under the carriage seats that I never tired of looking out at the countryside. The corn was ripening, and yet on top of the hills the sun shone on snow. And then, as by contrast, we would pass through dark deep forests that I thought would never come to an end.

I had to spend a good deal of time with the horses. They travelled eight in each truck, and each truck had a groom in charge of it.

We first sighted Vilno during the afternoon of the second day. We could see the town down in a valley about fifteen miles away. Immediately the whole train was in a bustle. We had to have all the animals, and everything else, ready to unload when we stopped so that we could get them to the circus ground before dark.

Again, at this station, were crowds of excited people. And here again I started my job of leading the horses from the train to the fair ground. It was three miles from the station to the circus, and we had to make the trip three times. At the end of the last trip my feet were sore, and I was very tired. But there was still work to be done. Bales of luggage, props, and cages had to be sorted and unpacked, and with one thing and another it was in the small hours of next morning when I fell on to a heap of hay in an empty stall and fell asleep.

Next morning I had time to look at the circus. You see, in those days nearly every town in Russia had its own circus ground. Markets and fairs

were held in them, and the travelling theatres performed there. A big circus like the Circus Truzi was a very important event.

This circus ground was a big place—bigger than any I had yet seen. We had booked it for a month. However, as I will tell you, we were to stay there only a week.

All through the week every performance was packed. During the night of the sixth day there was a big storm. It rained so hard that the ground was turned into a great quagmire of mud.

The force of the wind made the circus building shake and shudder. The building itself was a wooden structure, about thirty feet high. The roof was also of wood, except for a large area of canvas in the centre, which let in the light. From the roof to the ground ran very big ropes, which helped to support the building. The ropes were attached to large stakes, which were driven into the ground. But the wind was so strong that these stakes were continually wrenched out of the ground.

However, the storm did not keep the people away. In the afternoon and again in the evening we had to put the 'house full' boards out. Half-way through the evening performance the wind rose even higher. It roared and shrieked round the building until it seemed to me that it must fall any minute. As fast as we replaced the stakes in the ground they were pulled out again.

After inspecting the building, M. Truzi decided that every single person who was not actually in

the ring must come out and hold on to the ropes. Gingek acted as call-boy. As one artiste would dash in to give his turn, another would take his place on the ropes.

How we hung on to those ropes. By now one side of the building was lifted nearly a foot off the ground. We wondered how long we should have the strength to hold it down. We hung on there, slipping and sliding in the mud, wet and cold, deafened by the wind. I was so small that I was often blown right off my feet, and I do not think that my weight could have helped very much. Several times I fell flat on my face in the mud, until I was rolled in mud from head to foot.

At last the show was over, and the audience filed out. To us, nearly at the end of our strength, it seemed as if they came out very slowly. But at last we were told that there was no one else inside. Unable to hold on any longer, one by one we slipped from the ropes, our hands torn and bleeding. The building began to rock and sway. The wood cracked and groaned, and cracks appeared in the walls.

Then there came a terrific blast of wind. It picked me up and dropped me several feet away. I heard a terrifying noise, and, as I picked myself out of the mud, I saw the whole circus falling. It went slowly at first, as if it were loath to give in to the wind, then more quickly. Then there was one more fierce gust of wind and the whole place collapsed like a pack of cards.

It was pitch dark, and we could do no more that night. Almost as though satisfied with what it had done, the wind abated, and the rain stopped. Most of us just found a sheltered place, dropped down, and slept from exhaustion.

## CHAPTER XV

### THE CIRCUS ISAKO

THE next day Truzi decided that as the summer was coming to an end it was useless to wait in Vilno for the circus to be rebuilt. So it was decided that we should go straight back to Riga, the winter quarters of the circus.

So once again we had to load up our train, but this time the journey only took us just over a day. As the train passed through the town we could see the terrible havoc wrought by the storm. Houses were blown down and wrecked, trees were lying completely uprooted, and we passed raging torrents that had been peaceful streams.

It seemed a long time since I had seen my father and mother, and so I was longing to get to Riga. As we drew near the town I became very excited. I expect you little English boys know the feeling—I expect you have it when it is time to leave your schools and go home for the holidays.

When the train had been unloaded and everything was settled and orderly once again, I went to Rudolpho Truzi and asked him if I might go home for three weeks.

'Yes, Nicolai,' he said, 'but before you go there is something we have got to decide. We have to

find a name for you—something short and easy to say.'

I had often noticed that Truzi, being an Italian, had found difficulty in pronouncing my name. He wrote my name on a piece of paper and looked at it. At last he said: 'I know—*Coco*. It is a bit of both your names. Now, Coco, home you go to your mother, and don't forget to come back.'

From that day onwards my professional name has been *Coco*, sometimes spelt like that, and sometimes spelt *Koko*. And very soon I began to forget that I had any other name.

Home I went to my family, and how pleased we were to see each other. My mother embraced me and wept, and could not stop looking at me. My father wanted to hear of my progress and of all I had been doing while with the circus. And I was very happy and proud.

But after a day or two I began to miss the circus sadly. Then I asked my father if he would give me the money to go to Metava.

'Why can't you stay a little with us, your parents?' he asked. 'Why do you wish to go to Metava?'

'Father, I must go, I want to see the Circus Isako.'

He sighed and gave me the money.

When I reached Metava I went straight to the circus and asked for M. Isako.

'Well, young man, what do you want now?' he said.

'I want a job. I'm a clown now.'

'But you are still very young.'

'I'm nearly thirteen, and I've been with the Circus Truzzi,' I said proudly.

'Very well, you can have a job.'

I started to thank him, but he said: 'Don't thank me. If you are no good, why, you will not stay with my show.'

I found some lodgings in the town, and early next morning I was at the circus rehearsing. Isako came out to watch me, and I thought he seemed pleased with me.

I shall never forget that first night, when I did my first turn as an accredited and salaried artiste. I was so happy I wanted to cry all the time, especially when the audience clapped and applauded me. Besides the usual clowning I did some trapeze work.

I spent a happy three weeks with the Circus Isako. I have never forgotten a goat that was there. He was a very vicious goat. The first time I saw him he was looking in a rubbish heap for something to eat. I picked up some cigarette ends and gave them to him. He seemed to enjoy them. I gave him some more. Every day after that he would follow me about until I found him some cigarette ends. After he had eaten a good many he would begin to sneeze, and then the more he ate the more he sneezed. It was so comical to watch him eating and sneezing I would give him all the ends I could find.

One day as I was giving him his usual feed I

heard someone laughing behind me. It was Isako. I was frightened. But he said: 'Every morning I watch for you to give him his feed, and I laugh as well as you.'

At the end of the three weeks I told Isako that I must go back to Riga.

'Coco, you will be a very good artiste one of these days. Why don't you stop with me?'

But I told him that I had to go home.

'Very well, but if at any time you want a job, you shall have one here with me.'

Next day I took a train back to Riga.

## CHAPTER XVI

### A THEATRE IN ST PETERSBURG

WHEN the year 1913 was well on its way I finished my apprenticeship to Rudolpho Truzi. I stayed with the circus for a little while as a paid artiste. But soon I began to feel restless.

I told Truzi that I was going to leave the circus, and go home to my parents. He said he wished that I would stay, but my mind was made up and I had to go.

I packed up my few belongings and went round saying good-bye to all the friends I had made during my four years with the circus. They were sorry to see me go. 'Come and see us soon, Coco, we don't want you to go.' And I cried. I didn't want to go either.

I went home to my mother and father, and I stayed there for a few days. Then I went to my father and told him that I wanted to go to the Theatre Sokoloff at St Petersburg, of which I had heard from other artistes in Truzi's Circus.

He was angry with me. 'Why didn't you stay with the Circus Truzi? You're always causing me trouble, Nicolai. No, you stay here.'

In a few days I asked him again if I might go. 'Well, Nicolai, if you want to go I suppose

you'll have to go. But, my son, if things go wrong with you, don't come back to me again.'

I was delighted. Every artiste wanted to get to St Petersburg. And I, Coco, was really going.

My mother prepared my clothes and costumes, and bought me a suitcase. She gave me some money and took me to the station. She cried a little, and held my hand very tight. We found a carriage, and my mother asked a lady if she would look after me during the journey.

'Don't worry, little mother, I am used to travelling,' I said.

At this the lady laughed. I suppose, in spite of my new long trousers, I looked very young. But I felt very grown up, and my eldest brother, Alexander, had given me a watch.

At last the train started. I waved to my mother for as long as I could see her, and then settled down for the long journey.

It was a long journey to St Petersburg—over five hundred miles. As it got dark it also began to snow, and I could no longer see anything at all out in the darkness.

The other passengers asked me who I was and where I was going all by myself.

'I am an artiste,' I said. 'I am going to the Theatre Sokoloff in St Petersburg.'

They seemed interested, and asked me a lot of questions about circus life. I told them about my life with the Circus Truzi.

The passengers were kind, and gave me some food, which I ate hungrily. Soon I began to feel

very tired. I made myself as comfortable as I could, and was soon asleep.

When I awoke it was daylight. I looked at my new watch, and saw that it was nearly ten o'clock. The other passengers told me that in a little while we should be in St Petersburg.

Then we arrived and I tumbled out of the train. Never before had I seen such a station. So many platforms; so much noise and so many people hurrying about. I wondered how I should ever find my way out of it.

I left my case in a waiting-room, and made my way out into the street. I wandered round, feeling very lost. It was such a big city. I went up and down streets, looking for the Theatre Sokoloff.

Soon it began to get dark. I was in a busy part of the city, and all the streets were lit up. I looked, amazed, at the number of trams that were running up and down the streets. But I had not found my theatre yet. I thought I had better ask a policeman. I dodged through the carriages and trams to where he was standing.

'Please, sir, could you tell me where the Theatre Sokoloff is?'

He looked at me as though wondering what I could want with the Theatre Sokoloff. Then he said: 'Yes, little one,' and pointed down a long street that seemed to have no end.

'Down the Nevski Prospekt—about half-way down on the left-hand side.'

I thanked him and made my way through the

traffic to the street. It was a very wide street, with big shops on either side. Their lighted windows fascinated me. I stopped and looked in nearly every one, occasionally running across to the other side of the street to look in one there.

And then, suddenly, I saw the theatre. A huge notice, surrounded by coloured lights—THEATRE SOKOLOFF. At last I was there.

I looked at the posters and decided that I had better go in and see the show. I bought a ticket and walked in. I had never dreamed that there could be such a place. The stage was so big, and ablaze with lights. There seemed more people than in the whole of the rest of Russia.

A girl showed me to a seat, and I sat, lost in amazement and wonder.

The show was a mixture of theatre and circus. There were horses, elephants, clowns, augustes, tumblers, acrobats, and trapeze artistes. There were singers, both comic and serious, and dancers.

Once, during the show, I nearly shouted with excitement. One of the acrobats was a man who had been with the Circus Truzi when I was an apprentice. Then after that I saw other artistes I had met when I was with the circus.

As soon as the show was over, I ran round to the stage entrance. I looked about excitedly, and saw the acrobat I knew. He recognized me, and smiled.

‘What are you doing here, Coco?’

I told him that I was going to work at the theatre, and then I asked him if he knew where I could stay for the night.

'Wait for me, and I'll take you to where I am staying,' he said.

As we walked to his hotel he asked me if I had got a contract.

'No. But in the morning I'm going to see the director and get a job.'

He got a room for me at his hotel, and I went to bed.

Next morning I hurried to the station and got my case. Then I went back to the theatre. I walked in and saw a door with *Director* on it. I knocked, and it was opened by a girl. She asked what I wanted. I told her that I was an artiste and that I wanted to see M. Sokoloff. After a little while she let me in.

M. Sokoloff looked at me for a moment and then said: 'Well, what do you want?'

I told him that I was an artiste and that I wanted a job.

'The show is all booked up,' he said.

Then I told him who I was and where I had worked.

'I'm sorry, but I haven't room for any more artistes,' he said. 'But I will write you a letter of introduction to another theatre. You will get a job there.'

I felt very disappointed, but I thanked him, and took the letter when he had written it.

At this theatre I again saw the director, and

when he had read the letter he said: 'All right, you can start to-morrow on a fortnight's contract.'

I started the next day, and enjoyed my work at this theatre. I think the director was pleased, and I got on well with every one in the show. How I wished that my father could see me.

At the end of the fortnight the show was changed: I went to another theatre, and here again I was taken on for a fortnight. When this was finished I had a week each at two other theatres. Then I found that I had a fortnight's holiday before my next contract. By this time I had plenty of money, and so I decided I would like to see a little bit more of Russia. I decided to go to Moscow. It was nearly six hundred miles away, but the distance didn't worry me.

I went to my friend and told him that I was going to Moscow.

'But why go there? Always cold and snowing. Why don't you go to Feodosia? That is where I come from. It is always warm and the sun shines.'

'Perhaps I 'll go one day, but now I want to go to Moscow,' I said.

He wished me luck, and off I went to the Nikolai station. Before I got on the train I went to the post office and sent some money to my parents at Riga. Then I made myself comfortable and we were off. Little did I know then what a long time it would be before I saw St Petersburg again.

## CHAPTER XVII

### MOSCOW

IT was late at night when the train reached Moscow. I didn't know where to go, so I sat in the waiting-room, wondering what to do.

After a little while a man came in and spoke to me.

'You are a stranger here?'

'Yes.'

'I shouldn't stay here,' he said. 'The station police will come and turn you off. Come with me. There is a night café near here, and you can have something to eat.'

He showed me the way to the café, and here we sat down at a small table. I ordered something to eat. Then the man asked me to buy him some vodka. He drank this up quickly and asked me for some money. This frightened me, and I told him that I hadn't any. He swore horribly, and got up from the table and went away.

I was feeling very tired and lonely. I put my head down and dozed at the table. Had it not been for the noise of cab drivers entering and leaving the café I should have been fast asleep.

Suddenly I felt a hand on my shoulder and looked up. I saw a poorly dressed man looking down at me.

'I shouldn't sleep here, little one, the police will come and take you for having no home.'

'But I have a home,' I said. 'I've come here to work.'

'Well, why don't you go somewhere to sleep?'

'I don't know anywhere,' I said.

'I know a place,' he said slowly. 'It is very cheap. I haven't any money at all, but if you will pay for us both, I will show you where it is.'

I thought to myself that he looked very poor, but he looked a good man, and I badly wanted somewhere to sleep.

I got up: 'All right, you show me the way, and I'll pay for us both.'

After a few minutes' walking we came to a very bleak, bare building. My companion went to the office and asked for two beds. I gave him some money. Then we went to the room indicated by the clerk.

It was a big room, containing about twenty beds. There was one tiny light burning in the middle of the room, and by the light from this I could see that most of the beds were occupied.

This wasn't what I had expected at all. I had imagined a small room in some cheap hotel. But the sight of the beds reminded me how very tired I was. There were two empty beds at the far end of the room, and passing between rows of men, tossing and turning, snoring and grunting, we made our way to these.

My companion seemed to be used to this place.

With a muttered 'Good night,' he climbed into bed.

I looked at my bed. It seemed very dirty. I didn't like to get into it, so I lay down on top with my clothes on. Very soon I was asleep. I began to dream of an act I had done with another clown in the theatre. During the turn he had to hit me with a stick. He hit me hard, and it hurt me. He wasn't supposed to do that. He hit me again, even harder. In my dream I said to him: 'Be careful, what are you doing?'

Then I woke up. As I opened my eyes I again felt the stick. I blinked, and then I nearly fell off the bed with fright.

Standing over me were two policemen and another man in plain clothes.

'Now then, where are your papers?' said this man.

I was so terrified I couldn't answer.

'Come on, where are they? Who are you and what are you doing here?'

'I haven't any papers,' I whispered.

The man turned to the policeman: 'Put him with the others.'

The policeman seized hold of me and put me with eight or nine men in the middle of the room. Then they went on round the other beds.

The men with me muttered and shivered.

'That's Evdakimoff, may he be cursed!' someone said; and from the way they whispered of him, I could tell that this man, who was a high police official, was hated and feared.

Evdakimoff came striding down the room.  
'Take them to the police station,' he said.

At the police station we were all pushed into a big cell. We stayed here for about three or four hours, and I became more and more frightened as I listened to the others talking about Evdakimoff. No one took any notice of me.

The policemen came back and took the men out in batches of six. I was in the third batch to go. We were taken along a passage to a big door, and let in there one by one. At last I was the only one left. Then it was my turn.

I was so frightened I could hardly walk. There were a lot of policemen and other men in the room, and behind a large table sat Evdakimoff.

They stood me in front of the table and began to question me in detail. I did not know what to say. I knew that if I told them of my home in Riga I should be sent back by the police, and never again would my father let me work in a circus. And then I remembered his words: 'But, my son, if things go wrong with you, don't come back to me again.' How little attention I had paid to this at the time. How pleased I was to be leaving home again. At the thought of my mother and father I began to cry. I rubbed my eyes with my knuckles and said: 'I haven't any home and no parents.'

'What, no mother and father! Have you any relations at all?'

'Yes,' I said, 'I have an aunt in Feodosia. I live with her.' I thought that it would take

them some time to find out that this was not true.

'What are you doing in Moscow?'

'Please, sir, I'm an artiste, and artistes travel all over the country. I'm looking for a job.'

'Oh, you travel all over the country, do you?'

'Yes, sir. Oh, please let me go, sir.'

'Well, perhaps we'll let you go presently. Take him back to the cell.'

I lived in that cell with twenty other prisoners for a week. It was bitterly cold and it was damp. Through the slit of window I could see it snowing. I was hungry all the time.

One day, after a week had passed, a policemen told us that we were to be taken to the central jail that day. We were lined up outside the cell, and the men were handcuffed together in pairs. They left me by myself. Perhaps they thought I was too small to give any trouble. Then we were taken out into the street, where a party of soldiers were waiting to take us to the jail.

It was very cold and snowing hard. The central jail was across on the other side of the town. I was tired out by the time we reached it, and just trudged through the snow in a daze.

At the central jail the men were taken away by some warders, but I was taken to a big cell. I was roughly pushed inside, and I found it was full of boys about my own age. It was a big, cold place. There were no beds, but a long, narrow shelf, about a foot from the ground, ran down one length of the wall. Some of the boys

were lying on this, and I supposed that that was where I had to sleep.

A big, dirty boy came and asked me why I was there. I said that I didn't know and that I hadn't done anything. The boys all laughed at this, and called me ugly names.

'Here, you, have you got any cigarettes?' the big boy said to me.

'No, I'm sorry, I don't smoke,' I said.

They all yelled at me. 'He's a liar!' 'Mother's little darling doesn't smoke!' And then they crowded round me.

I was so frightened that I called to a passing warder to come and let me out.

'Shut up, you, and keep quiet.' And he walked away.

Soon it became dark, and one by one the boys curled up on the wooden bench. I was so tired that I found an empty space, curled up between two other boys, and went straight to sleep.

We were awakened early by a warder who brought our breakfast. It was cold tea and black bread. But I was so hungry that I thought I had never tasted anything so good.

I seemed to be in that cell many days. All day long I stood by the door, looking out through the bars, waiting for someone to come and let me out.

One day as I stood there looking very wretched, an old warder came over and spoke to me: 'What's the matter?'

I told him that I wanted to get out.

'What are you in here for?'

'I don't know, I haven't done anything at all,' I said.

'You don't know Evdakimoff,' said the warder. 'He'd keep his own mother here if it suited him.'

'But when are they going to let me out,' I said.

'I don't know; you'll just have to wait and see.' And with that he walked away.

But next morning after breakfast, he came to the cell and called me: 'Come along, I've got a job for you.' And with that he opened the door and let me out. Then he gave me a broom and told me to sweep the corridor and passages. Oh, the joy of being out, even if it was only in the corridor, and of having free movement for a little while and a sort of privacy.

For a week I was allowed out to do this sort of work every day, and I also carried the food from the kitchens to the other boys in the cell. I was put back into the cell again for the night.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### IMPRISONED

ONE morning, directly after breakfast, at the end of this week, the cell doors were opened and a warder stood out in the corridor reading out names from a sheet of paper. Suddenly I heard my name.

'Hurry up, you,' said the warder. 'Come on out here with the others.'

I thought at once that we were going to be freed, and I nearly cried for joy. But I was soon disillusioned. We were handcuffed together again, taken outside, and marched to the station.

At the station we were locked into a big shed to wait for the train. When at last we were let out it was already getting dark. The train was standing in the station. I saw that all the windows were barred. We were bundled into the carriages and the doors were locked.

All night we travelled. It was too cold to sleep, and we huddled together for warmth. Early next morning the train stopped and the doors were unlocked. We were so stiff from cold and cramped positions that we could hardly get out on to the platform. I saw from the notice that the station was Kursk.

Once more we trudged through the snow, until we arrived at some old buildings, attached to the prison. It was a terribly bleak, sinister-looking place. We were pushed into a big, filthy room, and the door locked on us.

When I heard the key turn once again in the lock I couldn't help crying my heart out. I was so hungry, I was very dirty, and my hair wanted cutting, and I had *so* hoped that we were going to be set free.

In this jail each person was allowed ten copecks to buy food. A man told me that the warder would come and ask us what we wanted. I thought the warder would never come, but at last he did. Most of the men bought cigarettes, and only a little bit of food. But I spent all my money on food. I bought some black bread and sausages, and some tea and sugar. When I got it, it looked a very small amount for one day.

Each morning the warder would come and ask us what we wanted for that day. I tried different sorts of food, but it made no difference—I was always hungry. It worried me, too, that I was so dirty. Some days there was a little cold water, and some days there was none. It was impossible to keep clean.

The warder told us that we should be moving on in a day or two. Sometimes, in the night, when I couldn't sleep for the cold, the idea would creep into my mind that I was being sent to Siberia. And I would lie shaking with fright. I had heard terrible tales of men being sent there for the rest

of their lives, and none ever came back. The other prisoners either cursed at me or laughed at me.

About a week after our arrival at Kursk we were moved on to Orel. We went through the same procedure as before—marched handcuffed to the station and locked into the train.

And at last, just twelve weeks after I had been arrested in Moscow, we reached Feodosia. I find it impossible to describe the horrors of that journey, although it is still vivid in my mind. We were cold, starved, dirty, tyrannized by brutal warders, and sometimes by even more brutal fellow-prisoners. We stopped at Kharkov, Melitopol, Kertch, and other places, and at each place we were kept in the prison a week.

As we moved south, we noticed that it was gradually getting warmer. Soon it was hot, and by the time we reached Feodosia it was very hot indeed.

When we were marched from the train to the jail I noticed cherries and tangerines being sold from stalls in the streets. I wondered at the people walking about in thin summer clothes. I was still wearing my filthy, tattered old winter overcoat. In fact, I dare not take it off. My clothes were so ragged that they nearly dropped off my body. My body was so verminous that I had nearly scratched all the skin off it, and so thin that I felt like a bundle of bones.

I was amazed at the sights I saw in the market—women with their faces veiled, dark-skinned

men selling fruit, and people of all nationalities talking many languages.

The prison was a big stone building, much more modern than those we had been in before. When I was searched the warder shook his head sadly, and said: 'You've had a bad time.'

The warder in charge of us was very kind to me, and said that he would try and get me into the prison hospital. But on the third day he said that it would be useless, as I was being moved the next day. When I heard this I burst into tears. I was so weak that I could hardly stand, and I felt that I should die if I was moved any more. But the warder said: 'Don't cry, little one, you will be taken to the police station, and then in a day or two you will be home.'

I couldn't really believe him. I had begun to believe that I should never be free again. I just stood staring at him. He patted my head and walked away.

Next day the warder came to the cell with a policeman, who took me away to the police station. Here I was locked in an empty cell. It was clean and light, but just the usual hard wooden shelf for bed.

Presently the policeman came and asked me what food I wanted. I asked him for bread and sausage, and for some of the fruit I had seen in the market. In the afternoon a policeman came and took me into the yard for exercise. There were other prisoners exercising there. They stopped and looked at me with surprise. I must

have looked an odd sight, with my long, dirty hair, and my tattered overcoat. They asked me why I was there and how long I had been a prisoner. When I told them that I had been a prisoner for twelve weeks and that I didn't know what for I could see that they didn't believe me. This made me so unhappy that I started to shout and scream. Then they came to me and tried to comfort me.

My cell was at the end of the corridor and there was another one at right angles to it. I could see into this one, and soon I found some of my friends of the prison yard. They talked to me through the bars, and asked me if I was hungry. *Hungry?* I told them I had been hungry since I was arrested in Moscow. We found that if I stretched out my arm I could reach some food that they passed me—cakes and fruit brought them by their friends.

These prisoners were not criminals but had perhaps been fined for some small offence, and, refusing to pay, had to serve a short sentence. The warders were always civil to these prisoners, who were able to give them small presents of money.

Every day they gave me food and fruit, and very soon I made myself ill with eating too much. One afternoon my stomach ached so badly that I shouted for the warder to come and let me out. He came and told me to shut up and wait until he was ready. Again I shouted to him. He came up angrily: 'Be quiet, you, and wait until I've seen to the others.'

Then I lost my temper and cursed at him.

'Answer me back, would you? I'll soon fix you.' And with that he opened the door and kicked me viciously on the leg.

It hurt so much that I thought my leg was broken, and I lay and moaned with the pain.

The prisoners next door asked me what had happened, and when I told them they were very angry. They called to the warder: 'Why did you kick him? He's done nothing wrong.'

They told him to go and fetch the chief of the police station. He was speechless with rage, but he knew that if he didn't he would never get any more presents, and would probably get into trouble anyway, so, glaring angrily at me, he went off and fetched the chief.

Presently the chief came and asked them what they wanted.

'The warder kicked that little boy. He's done nothing wrong, he doesn't even know why he's here.'

He came to my cell. 'Well, why *are* you here?' he said, not unkindly.

'Please, sir, I don't know.'

He turned to the warder: 'Unlock the door. He can come down to my office and I'll talk to him.'

Down in his office he sat at his desk and questioned me.

'What is your name?'

'Nicolai Poliakoff, sir.'

'Where do you come from?'

'I came here from Moscow, but my home is in Riga.'

He looked astonished. 'Riga! Then what on earth are you doing here? Now look, boy, I want the truth, please.'

I decided then that I had better tell him everything, so I told him of my home and my apprenticeship to Rudolpho Truzi, about my work as an artiste, and of all the events that led up to my arrest in Moscow. He seemed very interested. I told him of Evdakimoff, and he nodded his head: 'Yes, I know him.'

I told him of my life in the different prisons. I opened my overcoat and showed him my thin, vermin-covered body. 'Please let me go, sir, I swear I haven't done anything, I swear it,' I sobbed.

'Very well,' he said, 'go back to your cell now, and I will see what I can do for you.'

Three days after this the chief sent for me again. I was sure that I was going to be freed, and I went to the office with a light heart.

'Well,' said the chief, 'I have found out all I can about you and I understand that you have an aunt here in the town?'

'Please, sir, I only told them that because I was afraid to go back to my parents at Riga.'

'Well, all I can do is to send you back to Riga.'

I looked at him in horror and burst into tears.

'No, sir,' I shouted, 'you *can't* send me back the way I came. I won't go! I *won't!* You can

kill me first, I'll kill myself first, before I go back to all those prisons. I implore you, sir!'

For a little while he said nothing, while I stood in front of him twisting my hands together and crying.

At last he said: 'There's one other thing I can do. I will give you special papers so that you may travel by yourself. But, remember this, you must never stay more than two weeks in one town, and while you are there you must work hard to support yourself. And at each town you must report to the police station and show the papers I will give you.'

Between my sobs I tried to thank him as best I could.

'Now go back to your cell,' he said, 'and tomorrow I will have your papers ready and you shall go free.'

That night, lying on my hard bed, I could not sleep at all. *Free!* I was going to be free. And for the first time for many weeks I remembered I was an artiste. My ambition and my pride in my profession, that for so many weeks had lain asleep, starved and forgotten, began to stir in me. I tossed and turned, and the hard wooden edges of the bench dug into my thin body. The fact that I was many miles from Riga didn't worry me at all. I was an artiste and I would easily earn the money to get there. At last I got up and walked round and round the cell until morning.

After my breakfast the warder took me to the

office again. The chief smiled at me: 'Well, in a few minutes you 'll be free. Here are your belongings,' and he gave me my watch, penknife, and other oddments that had been taken from me.

Then he gave me my papers: 'Put these in your pockets and don't lose them. Wherever you go, behave yourself. Don't get into trouble with the police, or you will return to Riga the same way as you came here.'

'I promise, sir,' I said. 'I won't get into trouble.'

'Very well, off you go, and don't forget what I 've said.'

I tried to thank him, but there was a great lump in my throat and somehow I couldn't. I turned round and hurried after the warder, who put me out into the street.

## CHAPTER XIX

### FREEDOM AND THE KIND BARBER

OUT in the street I kept telling myself I was free. But it felt rather strange, and I didn't quite know what to do with myself. I thought how lovely a wash would be—a proper wash with soap and a towel. I began to wander round the town. And presently, for the first time in my life, I saw the Black Sea.

I had to look at it several times before I realized what it was. I had had no idea that you could get so much water all at once. Soon I could see the sands, crowded with people. That, I thought, is just the place for me to have a wash.

I made my way back to the market. I asked a man in charge of a cheap jewellery stall how much he would give me for my watch. He gave me fifty copecks for it. Then I went and bought a tablet of soap and a towel. I hurried down to the beach. I walked along it until I found a place where there were no people. Here I took off my overcoat, and my trousers and shoes, which were all I had on under it. I jumped into the water and lay down.

I shall never forget how happy I felt as I lay down in that water. For a long time I just lay, doing nothing. Then I sat up and washed myself

all over with my soap, until there wasn't a trace of dirt left. I didn't know at that time that seas were salt, and so it didn't occur to me to wonder why my soap lathered so well and washed me so clean. But I have learnt since that seas *are* salt, but that the Black Sea has very little salt in it.

When I had dried myself, I put on my ragged clothes and went back into the town. Now I must get my hair cut, and then I should be myself again.

I went up to two men standing on the street corner, intending to ask them the way to a barber's shop. When I started to speak, one of the men put his hand in his pocket and took out two copecks. He passed them to me almost without looking at me. I turned away, crying. He thought that I was a beggar. I, an artiste.

At last I found a barber's shop. I walked in and sat down to wait my turn. When it came I sat down in the chair. I turned to the man, and tried to explain to him that my hair was dirty. But he didn't seem to understand, and before I could explain he said: 'How do you want it?'

I told him to take all the long off and cut it very short indeed. Picking up the clippers, he started at the front and ran them right round, leaving only the crown covered. I looked at myself in the mirror and almost laughed aloud at the funny sight that I saw. Suddenly the barber held out his hands in disgust. He had found the vermin.

'Get out of here,' he said. 'Get out quick. I don't want you here.'

Before I could say anything he pulled me out of the chair. I ran out of the shop, feeling bitterly ashamed. As I walked down the street people laughed at me, and pointed. Soon I was dumb with misery and shame, and even the tears would not flow. I felt that this was the worst day since I was arrested.

After wandering about for some time, I found another barber's shop. I went in and sat down, and when it was my turn I said to the barber: 'Wait, I want to explain. I have money to pay, but my head is very dirty. I have been in prison a long time.'

'Well,' he said, 'wait until I have shut the shop and then I will see what I can do for you.'

For an hour I sat there and waited and then it was closing time.

'Now, little one, come here and tell me all about yourself,' and he shouted to his wife to get some hot water ready.

When I had finished telling him my story he took me out into the back yard, and I sat on a wooden box, while he covered me with sacks. He put on an old coat, and then he cut my hair, very short. My head felt so funny when he had finished, as though a great weight had been lifted off it.

His wife brought out a bowl of hot water and some soft soap, and the barber scrubbed my head hard all over. The soap must have been a strong

disinfectant, because my head smarted badly, but I didn't mind that, it was the first time that I'd been clean for weeks.

When he had finished, and my head was dry, he said: 'Have you any money?'

'Yes, I have a few copecks,' I replied, and took them out of my pocket to give to him.

'Well, here is some more,' he said, and gave me a silver rouble.

Then his wife brought me some of the barber's underclothes and told me to put them on. Then the barber said: 'Now little one, go to the market and buy some clothes, and go to the baths and have a good bath, then come back here.'

I hurried off to the market-place, feeling as though I was in a dream. There I bought trousers, shirt, jacket, and socks, a pair of white shoes, and a straw hat. Then I went to the baths and for ten copecks I had a lovely hot bath.

I walked back to the barber's shop, singing as I went. I knocked on the door and the barber let me in.

'My word!' he called to his wife. 'See who's come; you wouldn't know him.'

We all ate together in the kitchen, and I ate a tremendous meal, answering their many questions as best I could between mouthfuls.

After supper the barber said: 'You are going to stay here for to-night.'

He showed me upstairs to a little room at the top of the house. He wouldn't let me thank him, but just patted my shoulder and hurried off down-

stairs. I undressed, climbed into the clean, comfortable bed, and fell asleep at once.

Next morning, at breakfast, the barber said to me: 'We would like you to stay with us. I'll find you a job.'

I asked him if there was a circus in the town. He told me that the nearest one was at Melitopol.

For a week I lived with the barber and his wife. Every day I went out in the town, looking for a job and seeing the sights. At the end of the week I decided to go to Melitopol and try and get a job with the circus there. I knew that the barber was only a poor man and could not keep me for long, and also I was not allowed to stay more than a fortnight in one place. I explained all this to the barber. He begged me to stay with them, but I said that I must go.

The kind barber and his wife said good-bye to me with tears in their eyes. I might have been their only son. I, too, felt sad. I thanked them for their help and kindness, and started off for the station.

There I waited for a train to Melitopol. Making sure that no one saw me, I climbed into a carriage. It was dusty and very uncomfortable; and although I didn't get under the seat this time I was worried all the time lest somebody should ask to see my ticket. But I was moving on; what did it matter? And besides, wasn't I going to see a circus again?

## CHAPTER XX

### CIRCUS AGAIN

IT was next day before the train reached Melitopol. I was lucky, because the carriage was empty when it arrived, although a great many people had got in and out at the various stations in between. It took me a long time to get out of the station unseen, but at last I managed it, and the first thing I thought of was food.

I found a café and ordered some food. While I was eating I asked the waiter where the circus was. He looked at me as though wondering what I could want with a circus. I looked down at myself. I was black with dirt again.

But he told me where the circus was, and as soon as I had finished my meal I made my way there. It was only a small circus, but I didn't mind that; it was a job I wanted.

I walked in, and seeing one or two people standing about, I went up to them and asked if I could see the proprietor. They looked at me and laughed.

'I'm the proprietor, what can I do for you?' one of them said.

'I'm an artiste and I want a job, please, sir,' I said.

'Oh, so you are an artiste, are you? Yes, I can see that by your clothes.'

I heard laughing behind me and turned round sharply. And then I realized that this man was not the proprietor. He was having a game with me—'pulling my leg,' as you say in England.

'You're not the proprietor,' I said. 'Please take me to the real proprietor.'

'You're a funny one,' he said; 'but come on, come with me.'

The proprietor was in his office: 'Well, so you want a job? What can you do?'

'Oh, everything,' I said. 'I was with the Circus Truzi. I can clown, sing, and dance and do acrobatics.'

The proprietor looked rather doubtfully at me, but he said: 'Well, anyway, I'll give you a chance. Come back in the morning.'

That night, lying in bed in a cheap lodging-house, I went over all my gags and turns in my mind, and wondered whether I had forgotten any. But gradually they all came back to me, and it seemed to me that I had forgotten nothing.

I was up very early the next morning, and so excited that I could eat very little breakfast. I almost ran to the circus. It was so early when I got there that the proprietor was not ready to see me. I passed the time away walking round. It was only a small place, but it was a circus, and I was going to work there. I was very happy.

About nine o'clock a man told me that the proprietor was ready to see me. I hurried after

him into the ring. The proprietor was standing there.

'You *were* early this morning, young man,' he said. 'What's your name?'

'Nicolai Poliakoff, but they call me Coco.'

'Right. Well, Coco, I must see what you can do. You must give a rehearsal in the ring now.'

'But, sir,' I said, 'I'm a proper artiste. I can't work without an audience.'

'If you want to work for me, hurry up. The other artistes will be the audience.'

'Very well, sir, but can I have some make-up? I'd feel better with some make-up.'

One of the artistes brought me some grease-paint, and in a few minutes I had made my face up. Then I started my turns. I did everything. Dancing, clowning, and acrobatics; and I added some tricks that a contortionist had taught me in St Petersburg.

Breathless, I finished. The proprietor smiled at me: 'Good, my lad, good.'

The other artistes shook me by the hand, and one of them said: 'Sorry I fooled you yesterday, Coco.'

Oh, the joy of being called Coco again!

'You can start in the programme to-night,' said the boss.

That night I stood at the back of the ring watching the turns. Suddenly the boss said: 'You on, Coco, *now*.'

As I made my way into the ring, I felt sick with fright, and my mouth was dry. I kept

saying to myself: 'I must do my best. I must be better than I ever was before.'

Then I was in the ring. It seemed very quiet—no sound but the band playing softly—I started my act. Slowly I warmed up. Gradually I forgot that I had ever left the circus. Never before had I put so much into a turn. The silence was broken by little bursts of laughter, then by clapping, and, as I turned to leave the ring the applause broke out in earnest and nearly brought the roof down.

I went to the dressing-room and sat down, feeling very tired suddenly. The boss came in and congratulated me. Then he asked me some questions about myself. I told him nearly everything, but I did not tell him that I could only stay in one place for two weeks.

'Well, Coco, you can stay with me as long as you like,' he said, and went out.

I was a success with this circus, and I was very happy there. I should have liked to have stayed with them, but I was afraid of the police. So on the Saturday, two weeks after I had arrived there, I collected my pay, and with many regrets slipped away without telling any one.

## CHAPTER XXI

### THE DEVIL-MAN

I HAD heard that there was a circus at Kharkov, and as it was on my way back to Riga I decided to go there.

When I got there I looked round for the circus, but instead of a circus I found a big open-air theatre. It was called the Tivoli Gardens.

Here, at the Tivoli Gardens, I was employed as an acrobatic act at a salary of ninety-five roubles for fifteen days. This was more money than I had earned for a long time. I felt very rich, and bought some new clothes.

There was one act that still makes me smile when I think of it and of the man who did it. A big hole was dug in the ground, about five feet square, it would be. Six feet from the hole there was a very tall pole with a little platform on top. The artiste would get on to the platform, dressed in a devil's costume. The hole would be filled up with water, and some powder scattered round it by the firemen. This would be lighted. The devil-man jumped, and it looked as if he was jumping straight into a fire. It looked very effective.

But this poor man was always very unlucky. Always when he jumped he seemed to make a

mistake or to have an accident. In this fifteen days he could only jump six or seven times. The rest of the time injuries prevented him from appearing. He never seemed to jump the same way twice, and no one ever knew what he would do. Sometimes he would land in the water with his feet, sometimes sideways, and sometimes head first.

A very funny thing happened. The last act on the stage itself was a gipsy chorus. This was a very merry act. They sang and danced, and a little gipsy boy of about four years old danced better than any of them. The audience were in good spirits, shouting for the little boy until he could dance no more. When this turn finished, the manager, in evening dress, came out and announced: 'Ladies and gentlemen, I have great pleasure in introducing to you the one and only man-devil. He will now jump, perfectly safely and with no trouble at all, forty feet down into a five-foot hole.'

The 'devil' comes out on to the stage, dressed in red tights, his red cape beautifully spangled. He bows, takes off his cape, and climbs to the top of the pole on a rope ladder. He is on the platform. Two spotlights are turned on him. He looks a fine sight in their lurid glare. He kneels on the platform and gets into position. The band is playing. The firemen fire the powder. Devil-man calls: 'All right.' The band stop playing. The drums begin to roll. They roll louder and louder. He is off! He makes a

half-somersault in the air, and lands in the hole—on his head!

We are all watching. What has happened? He cannot get out. The firemen put the fire out. Women in the audience scream. The band starts playing very loudly. Two firemen jump into the hole and pull him out by his legs. His head was well stuck in the mud!

The devil-man was taken to his dressing-room where we tried to clean him up. The manager ran on to the stage and said: 'Ladies and gentlemen, nothing at all alarming has happened. The devil-man will come out in a moment and take a bow.'

The band played a chord, and the devil-man came out and took a bow. The audience cheered, and then started to move off. I could see the happy, satisfied smiles on their faces.

But the devil-man had no happy smile on his face. It had been his last jump in the Tivoli Gardens, because the management had decided that he was too much responsibility for them. Poor devil-man!

## CHAPTER XXII

### BACK TO TRUZI

WHEN my two weeks at Kharkov were over, I had plenty of money, and I took a ticket straight to St Petersburg. I tried to find the case I had left there when I set out for Moscow, but I could find no trace of it anywhere and so decided not to bother any more about it.

By this time I was tired of travelling and I felt very homesick, so I decided to go home to Riga. I bought a ticket that same day and arrived in Riga late the next day.

It was the same Riga. Somehow I hadn't expected it to be the same. It was all so familiar I could have cried with joy. As I hurried from the station to our house, all the past twelve weeks seemed like a dream, and I felt that I had never left Riga.

At last I reached the house and walked in. The first person I saw was my mother. She turned very pale and started to cry.

'Nicolai! We thought you were dead.'

She took me in her arms and felt me all over. 'It is you, Nicolai? You are not dead then?'

I laughed and hugged her. It was good to be home. My brothers and sisters came running in from the yard where they had been playing, and we all started laughing and talking at once. They had so many questions to ask, and I had so much to tell them.

Presently my father came home. He seemed pleased to see me, but he made no fuss of me. He was beginning to know me too well.

The next day I went back to the Circus Truzi to see all my old friends. How we laughed and cried. How we talked and talked. I was so happy to be back.

But I felt I could not stay at home doing nothing and so I asked Rudolpho Truzi to give me a job. He gave me one at once, and so I was back in the Circus Truzi again.

Something happened one night that gave me a bigger fright than I had ever had in my fourteen years of life. A new artiste, a Chinese conjurer, had joined the circus. One night he asked me, in language I could hardly understand, to help him in his act. I was proud that he had asked me, and that night I lay down on the wooden table in the ring. This was the only thing I had understood in my talk with him. I smiled and waited. I looked up and saw that yellow-faced Chinaman bending over me and looking at me very fiercely. Suddenly he drew an enormous gleaming knife and plunged it into my stomach. I lifted my head, sick with horror, and saw the blood spurting in every direction.

But the Chinaman hissed at me to lie still. I did so. The audience was silent, wondering. Suddenly the Chinaman picked me up and tossed me on to my feet. I still felt dazed and numb, but the audience was cheering now, and I had enough sense left to bow to them before I ran off.

Later the Chinaman explained to me that the blade of the knife went into the hilt, which had special containers from which the 'blood' spurted. When I moved it nearly dislodged the knife-hilt clipped to my flesh, and would have spoiled the act. I am glad that it didn't.

There was a theatre in the town at this time which had a 'hypnotic' turn. A man made a girl rise up in the air by hypnotizing her. The turn was staged on a platform by a cushion, worked by men underneath the platform. The supporting part of the jack was V-shaped, so that when something was passed underneath the girl, it gave the impression that nothing was there. Well, one night the 'hypnotist' unfortunately got caught in the protruding part of the V, and when the energetic men underneath the stage got to work, he was lifted up into the air with the girl! The audience were very angry when they saw that they had been fooled, and the whole circus thought it wiser to leave the town!

I was very happy at this time. I had seen my home again, and my beloved parents were well. And I was back with the circus, doing the work I loved, among old friends. What more could I

want? Life seemed good to me. But then I didn't know, during this happy summer of 1914, what life had in store for me. I didn't know that this little circus clown was to be caught up in great events he couldn't understand.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### WAR

HERE I was, working happily, with little thought for anything but the glorious possibilities the circus held for me. But one day Gingek did not come for the show.

The next morning he came. But he wasn't the same Gingek. He was in uniform, and he walked with a swagger, a smirk of satisfaction all over his face. I ran up to speak to him.

'Be off with you,' he said. 'Soldiers do not talk to children. Run, before I beat you with this bayonet.'

I was hurt and angry. I ran off to ask someone what it all meant. I found that a war had started between Germany and Russia.

All thoughts of my future as a famous clown now left my head. Gingek's contempt had stung me. I had only one thought now—to become a soldier. I was fourteen. That did not matter very much in those days, but also I was very small for my age. That did matter. And my repeated attempts to join a Russian regiment only met with much laughter, and the suggestion that I should go back to school for a few years.

At last I happened to go to the recruiting depot of the 11th Siberian Infantry. This regiment was made up of men who were half Russian and half

Tartar, and they were all very small. But I found later that their hearts were big, and their appetite for fighting altogether out of proportion to their size.

I was accepted! The joy of that moment almost equalled the joy I felt on my first appearance as a paid artiste. They found I could ride a horse, and they made me one of the outriders to the regiment. I had a long cavalry coat! And spurs! And a sabre that clanked against my legs. I felt like a general.

In a few days I saw Gingek again. His mouth dropped open, and he nearly sprang to attention when he saw my sword and spurs.

'Be off with you,' I said. 'I am an outrider. We do not talk with foot-sloggers!'

How I enjoyed that moment.

At first I found war even more exciting than the circus. It wasn't long before I had my first military triumph. It was near Oli, when we were reconnoitring in advance of our battalion. We were riding past a haystack, and there was something about the shape of it that made me look at it closely.

'Halt!' I yelled.

There was a terrible commotion among the troops, and the officers galloped up, cursing me.

They shouted at me: 'What is it?' And I showed them.

The hay had been blown away from the side of the stack and from out of it the muzzle of a machine-gun was sticking. We pulled down the

haystack, and inside it we found a machine-gun, with boxes of ammunition. The enemy had been preparing for a sudden advance.

'Nicolai, you are a clever, brave boy,' said the old general, as he pinned a cross of the Fourth Class to my tunic. This, together with the promotion to rank of lance-corporal, was my reward.

I was proud and happy. War as yet meant only glory and adventure. I didn't know then of any other side of war, or that my proud, shining eyes would be clouded with tears of grief and horror.

I was barely fifteen, and at that age a medal seemed to me to be worth everything. But within six months I was crouching at the bottom of a trench, crying, while all round me the very earth was dissolving into smoke and fire. This was a war I did not know. The game had changed.

A few months later I was lying in hospital in Riga, wounded in a bombing raid.

I returned to the front again, a nervous, trembling boy, and two months after I was carried back again, wounded in the feet and face. This time I was sent to Petrograd for special treatment.

When I was a little better, I found that I still had a sense of humour, and we had a lot of fun in the ward.

We were not allowed to smoke in the ward, and how I longed for a cigarette. One night the orderly left the room and a man in a bed near me quickly lit up a cigarette.

'Brother,' I called, 'could you give me a smoke?'

'All right, Coco, but *I* can't throw, and *you* can't walk. How are you going to get them?'

'Watch,' I said. 'Just like this. Allez-oop!' I half fell out of bed, and then walked to his bed on my hands. I took the cigarette and walked back, my bandaged feet waving in the air.

But the fun didn't last long. Things were going badly with my beautiful Russia. It seemed as if the Germans could make no mistake. Each day their armies came nearer and nearer. I would lie awake at night, and in my head I seemed to hear the relentless tramp, tramp of their marching feet. I know it was only in my head, but some nights, as I tossed and turned in my narrow hospital bed, it seemed very close.

In these days, and in the days to come, Nicolai the boy slowly died, giving place to Nicolai the man. But Coco the clown lived on then, and will live always, I think.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### REVOLUTION

SOON we noticed that food was getting very short. There was good food only for those desperately ill.

One morning the chief medical officer came into the ward and made an appeal. There was hardly any food left, he said, and any patient strong enough to walk was asked to leave and fend for himself. He would be given sick leave and could return to his home.

Although I still felt very weak, I said I would go. It was a funny sort of sick leave. The clothes they gave me would have made a circus audience roar and rock with laughter—a soldier's coat, an athlete's belt, and civilian trousers; the hat I cannot describe. In these grotesque clothes I was turned loose in the snows of Petrograd.

But this was a Petrograd I did not know. The city was starving. Everywhere the workers were on strike. Hoardings carried posters warning them to stop their strike on pain of twenty-five years in Siberia—or the firing-squad. There were muttering crowds, grey, pinched faces, and wailing children. People, literally starving to death, huddled into the angles of the walls, trying to keep off the deadly cold. The streets were thick

with snow and ice. And everywhere armed policemen moved the miserable people on.

Tears of weakness and sorrow ran down my face as I tried to find my way to the railway station. The station I wanted to reach was on the other side of the River Neva. When I got to the bridge I found huge crowds of people. Someone told me that the trains never came. A policeman said that no one would be allowed to cross the bridge that night.

I wondered what I should do, and heartily I wished myself back in the hospital, even with no food. As I stood there, shivering, a motor lorry came roaring down the street. It was packed with students, soldiers and sailors on leave, and a few women.

The lorry stopped in the middle of the crowd. A long-haired student stood up on a box and addressed the crowd in passionate language.

'My comrades!' he cried. 'The war is being lost. At home they are starving you to death. There is no hope for you! Are you going to stand by and see your husbands starved to death, your wives dying from the cold, your children trampled underfoot?'

As he finished his long speech, he whipped off the lorry a red cloth, which he waved like a banner. I saw then that the lorry was full of weapons—bayonets, swords, revolvers, and ammunition.

The crowd seemed to go mad. What cries and cheers came from those poor weak throats.

Someone handed me a bayonet. I stuck it in my belt. Even at that moment the sight of my athlete's belt made me grin.

I thought then that I had better try and get back to the middle of the city. I had reached the main bridge spanning the river, and could go no further, as a company of Cossacks were holding the bridge and preventing the huge crowds on either side from meeting.

A tired old man, carrying a dinner-basin tied up in a red handkerchief, tried to push his way through the crowd. A Cossack stopped him. In a thin, piteous voice, the old man explained that if he could reach the other side of the river his daughter might let him have a little food. Looking sadly at him, the Cossack refused and turned away. The old man trailed wearily after him, repeating an old Russian proverb that says that a man who is not hungry can never believe a man who is hungry. This annoyed the Cossack officer. He ordered the soldier to take the old man away. The soldier did not move. With an angry oath, the officer rode up to the old man and slashed him furiously across the face with his riding-whip. The old fellow dropped his empty basin and began to cry.

Without a word, the Cossack drew his sabre and killed the officer.

Pandemonium broke loose. The Cossacks killed all their officers. The crowd went mad and tried to rush the bridge. But from every housetop along the quays there came a rain of bullets, fired

by policemen hidden there with machine-guns. Many people were killed and the bodies were tossed over into the river. A howling, impasioned mob streamed across the bridge and stormed the public buildings.

The revolution had begun.

I decided that this was no kind of a circus for me. I must get to Riga at all costs.

I was trying to push my way through the crowd in the Zabolkanski Prospekt when there was a fresh burst of firing from the machine-guns on the roofs. Men and women were shot down all round me. I ran, slipped, and cut my leg on the bayonet still stuck into my belt.

Dazed and frightened, I picked myself up. Just as I was passing a big building, someone cried: 'Look out, there!' I rushed to one side just as a huge cabinet came crashing through a top-floor window. It smashed to splinters on the pavement, and out rolled three high police officials—dead. A soldier on horseback—how funny he looked—rode up and emptied his revolver into them—just to make sure.

The crowd, screaming and shouting, tore the red-lined coats off the dead men. They made the linings into tiny red rosettes. An excited, laughing girl pressed one into my hand. I stuck it into my coat. But I didn't want it. I wanted to get to my mother and father in Riga.

I pressed on to the station. A circus clown in a revolution! There is something comic in the idea. But just then I didn't feel very comic.

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE RED AND THE WHITE

AMONGST the crowd at the station, in my queer costume, my bayonet in my belt, and a red rosette in my buttonhole, I thought I looked enough of a revolutionary to get a pass for Riga.

Hours later, it seemed, a train came in. Thousands of men, women, and children stampeded over the platforms. Women fainted. Children were trampled underfoot. I heard terrible cries and groans. Humanity and decency were forgotten in this wild exodus from a city gone mad.

It was quite impossible to get into a compartment, so I climbed to the top of a coach. It was crusted deep in snow. But so thickly wedged were the passengers in the coach underneath me that the heat of their bodies rose like plumes of smoke through the ventilators. And this vapour, nauseating though it was, was the only thing that kept us alive as we travelled through that dreadful night of a Russian winter.

The journey seemed an eternity. But at last we reached Riga. Nearly dead with cold and exhaustion, I hurried to my home. Oh, mother and father, oh, brothers and sisters, it was good to see you all, and to be with you! At that moment I never wanted to leave home again.

But my elder brother was returned from the War. He was angry with the revolutionaries.

'Nicolai,' he said, 'you must come with me and join Kerensky's army. It is our duty.'

My mother wept and clung to me. And to tell the truth, I was not eager to see any more fighting, against anybody.

But I joined, and was drafted into the First Petrograd Artistes Company, which was sent from camp to camp to entertain the troops. All day we worked, all night we travelled. But the soldiers were restless and anxious to be demobilized. They didn't want entertainments, so the Artistes Company was disbanded.

Then I joined the White Ukraine army at Kiev. Here I shared a room with a railwayman. He was a dark fellow, and secretive. But he laughed when I showed him my tricks. He was destined to be a friend in need to me.

One day the Red Army stormed Kiev and drove the Whites out. In the confusion I was left behind and found myself in the hands of some of the Red soldiers.

They seemed to think that I was a secret service agent. They asked me many questions about the White Army. I protested that I knew nothing. The butt of a rifle crashed into my face.

'A little reminder, eh, comrade?'

Then they beat me with rifles until I was half dead.

'Better to tell and live, eh, comrade?'

'I know nothing,' I sobbed out. 'I am only a circus clown; I have been entertaining the troops.'

The soldier spat on the floor: 'A clown? Well, clown, we have a theatre here for you. Bring him along.'

I was dragged to a building, and the guards pushed me in. I saw an astonishing sight. I was in the Kiev theatre. The stalls were filled with prisoners—officers, soldiers, civilians, suspected aristocrats, wandering merchants, beggars, sick and wounded, they had all been rounded up by the Reds and put in the theatre seats, while all round stood armed sentries.

The stage was empty when I was thrown into a seat, but soon a Red officer strode on, a paper in his hand.

Quickly he read out a list of names. The prisoners named were dragged from their seats and marched out. After a few minutes we heard a fusillade. That was all.

Next to me sat an officer. We would try to ease the awful tension by talking. I told him of my life as a clown and of the concerts I had been giving to the troops. We would look up as the officer read another list of names, listen to the fusillade, and then try and talk again.

Then the officer came on again, without his paper. Were we all to be released? Every ear was strained.

'Nicolai Poliakoff,' he shouted.

So I was to go alone.

The officer silently pressed my hand. I walked with the two guards to the anteroom.

Then my heart gave a great jump. There, sitting at the table, wearing a leather jacket, was the railwayman, my room companion at Kiev.

'Tell them I am no soldier,' I gasped. 'I have killed no comrades. I am a clown.'

'All right, all right, comrade Coco,' he said. 'Take it easy. I have been looking for you everywhere. It's all explained. You will be set free.'

'Free to go home?' I said. 'Oh, thank you, thank you. I have had enough of war.'

'No, no,' he said, 'not that. You must join the Railway Red Army of Kiev.'

My heart groaned inside me. But it was that or the firing squad, so I joined.

The senseless programme of war continued. The White Army advanced and drove us out of Kiev. We retreated to Ramadan, between Kiev and Poltava. And then disaster came—an epidemic of typhoid swept over the camp.

One morning I received orders to go to Poltava to take charge of some supplies. I remember nothing much of that expedition, for as the day wore on I felt more and more unwell, and then, with horror, I recognized the first symptoms of typhoid. I collapsed suddenly into blackness.

I woke up in a strange bed in a strange place. Then I saw the face of a nurse bending over me. I asked her where I was.

'Hush,' she said, 'this is Poltava. The Whites

have taken the town. They don't quite know who you are. Say nothing until you are well.'

I did as she told me. When I was well enough to be marched before the German officer who was commanding this section of the White Army, I pretended I was still dazed and incoherent. Indeed, on the way, I fainted again. They were flogging a man with rifle ramrods. His screams were terrible, the guards were cursing and the blood flowing. I thought that this was the next treat in store for me.

But when I recovered I found that no one had any hard feelings towards me, and when they learnt that I could speak some German I was made an interpreter.

One day, after being some time in Poltava, I felt so weary and homesick that I thought I would risk approaching the officer in charge.

I went to him nervously: 'Can you tell me, please, Herr Kommandant, how much longer I have to stay here?'

He looked surprised: 'Why, are you a prisoner?'

'I think so, Herr Kommandant.'

'On what charge?'

'I do not know, Herr Kommandant.'

'I will look into the matter,' he said.

Next day I was sent for and the Kommandant said: 'Nobody seems to know anything about you. If you want to go, go now.'

I saluted him. For the first time in my life I was happy that nobody cared whether I lived or died, or stayed or departed.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### FATHER AND BROTHER

I FOUND my way, after some months of struggle, to Moscow. The city was melancholy and disorganized, stricken by famine. Potatoes and herrings were worth their weight in gold. Starving people, risking the bullets of the guards, scrabbled and dug in the pits to find decayed food. Even now I cannot bear to think of the hideous scenes of cruelty, hunger, and lust that I saw then.

One day, when I was wandering along the streets, somebody called me by name. It was my father's voice. I stood in frozen amazement. I could not believe what I had heard. Then I turned round cautiously. There stood my father, whom I had believed safe in Riga. He was thin-faced and in rags and he smiled wistfully at me.

He told me briefly of those strange, stormy days, and of what had brought him to Moscow. But we soon turned to the more urgent problem of how to get something to eat. Eventually we thought of a plan. It involved walking miles into the country, buying bread, and bringing it back to Moscow to sell at a profit. But it worked and kept us from starvation. After a time we were able to travel to Vitebsk.

While I was in Vitebsk I met by chance an old Italian circus clown, called Bernardo. His

sons had deserted the old man, and he was alone. I thought things over and decided that we might keep out of trouble and away from fighting if we combined together and did the work I had done in the Kerensky army — the organization of concerts for the troops. I put this to Bernardo.

'No,' said Bernardo, 'I'm too old to fight. I do not wish to be a soldier.'

'I tell you you won't have to fight,' I said. 'It is good work, easy, with money in it.'

'Sure I won't have to fight?' said Bernardo.

'Certain,' I said.

We went to the Red Army headquarters and told them of our plan. This plan was approved, and we were told we could have a small percentage of all money taken at the performances we had organized. So we enlisted.

We had some days to wait for our orders. One of these days I found my father counting our little store of money. I had not told him of my plans.

'Nicolai,' he said, 'we have enough to take us home to Riga.'

'You take it, father, and go,' I said. 'I have to stay here.'

'Staying?' he said. 'And here? Why?'

Then I had to tell him about Bernardo and how I felt that I had to stay with him. My father was reluctant to go without me, but at last I persuaded him to go. He went sadly, taking many messages from me to my mother and brothers and sisters.

Then came the Red Army orders—and a bombshell for us. We were ordered to Siberia on active service!

Although I could not help it, the thought that I had got Bernardo into this worried me terribly. Poor old Bernardo, I wonder if he has ever forgiven me. For every mile of that awful journey to Siberia he thought of a new name for me. When he had worked them all out in Italian, he would begin all over again in Russian.

Conditions in Siberia were terrible. It is enough to say that we both realized that if we didn't get out of that frozen hell we should both die. Poor Bernardo nearly did die, and he was invalided home. It wasn't many days after that I followed him—another casualty.

When at long last I did reach Riga, there was no light and laughter in my home, and no one had the heart to make much of Nicolai. One day, while I had been in Leningrad, a party of Reds had burst into our home. My elder brother was there, having a meal with my father and mother. The Reds knew him for an ex-soldier in the White Army. They dragged him out into the back garden. My poor mother screamed and entreated them in vain. They shot him down there and left him to bleed to death in the snow.

For the first time I felt that senseless hatred that burnt at the core of this revolution, and I swore vengeance against all Reds.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### MARRIAGE FEAST

I DECIDED that I would stay at home with my father and mother for a little time. They were growing older and were sad and lonely after my elder brother's cruel death. I managed to get stage work at a cinema in the town.

Every night, on my way home from work, I had to pass a block of flats. One night, passing these flats, something fell on to the pavement in front of me. I saw a box of matches. I picked them up and looked up at the house. Two girls and one young man were looking from a sixth-floor window, laughing at me. I called up, and asked them if the matches belonged to them. One of the girls called: 'Yes, they are mine. Wait, and I will fetch them.'

The girl came down. I looked at her and I thought she was the loveliest girl I had ever seen. We smiled at each other.

'My name is Nicolai Poliakoff,' I said, 'but I am called Coco.'

'My name is Valentina. I am so glad to meet you in person, because I have often seen you on the stage.'

'You should not keep your windows open in such weather, Valentina.'

She started to speak and then stopped, looking down. At last she said: 'I dropped the matches on purpose. I have long wanted to know you.'

'I am very glad to know you also, Valentina.'

She said: 'Won't you come up, and I will introduce you to my brother and my friend.'

So I went up with her. Her brother was a nice young fellow, about twenty years of age. His name was Victor, and he was a pilot in the Red air force.

'I have seen you on the stage many times,' he said to me, 'and always when I see you I enjoy myself very much.'

I found that I already knew his friend. She kept a little shop and sold cooked horse-meat at forty roubles a pound. I had often bought from her.

They gave me a cup of tea sweetened with saccharine. And that day, when I looked at Valentina, I knew that she would be my wife.

Times were very hard in Riga just then. The White Army was only forty miles away. Food was very scarce and people were starving. The English and American Governments used to send food to Riga—rice, cocoa, sugar, flour, and milk. In nearly every street they opened canteens, where food was cooked for the poor people. People would queue up early in the morning, however cold it was, for the sake of getting a little hot meat. It was almost impossible to find a bread shop. And if bread *was* sold, it was sold very quietly, because if the Bolsheviks heard of

it, they would come to the shop and take everything away from it, paying in Kerensky money, which was worthless.

I worked at the cinema for eighty roubles a day. But forty of the roubles were paid to me in Kerensky money, and that bought nothing. With the other forty roubles I could, if I was lucky, buy a pound of bread.

But this cinema was always full. The people did not know what to do with themselves in their hunger. They would go there and sit there from opening time to the end of the last performance, and you couldn't even throw them out. A hungry audience, laughing at a hungry clown.

One day Valentina asked me to go to lunch. I accepted joyfully, sure that I should certainly get *something* to eat. Perhaps you would like to know what we had?

We had potato peelings, washed and minced, mixed with a little pea flour and fried in castor-oil. I had only eaten very little for three days, and it was delicious.

Things grew worse. People would walk twenty or thirty miles out of Riga to try and find food. Sometimes the farmers would give them some bread in exchange for clothes, gold, and silver. At last I had to exchange my overcoat for two pounds of bread.

In the May of 1919 the Bolsheviks left Riga, and the town was occupied by Latvian and German soldiers.

In June Valentina and I were married at the

Orthodox Church. We went back to my mother-in-law's house, and for our wedding feast we had on the table a pound of bread and one salt herring.

' You eat, Valentina,' I said.

' No, Nicolai, you eat; you have to go to work.'

' Listen, I will cut it in half,' I said. I did so, and that was our wedding party.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE LATVIAN ARMY

ONE day, in the October of that year, as I was walking home from the theatre, some soldiers stopped me and asked me my name and age. After I had told them, they said: 'That's enough. Come with us.'

The soldiers had picked up many people before me, and they took us straight to the barracks. I knew what had happened. I had been 'pressed' into the Latvian Army. I at once asked them to let me go home and tell my wife that I was in the army. But they would not let me go.

Next morning we were taken to the gymnasium and given a medical examination. Afterwards, in the barracks, a soldier came to me and said: 'Poliakoff, your wife is here. You may see her through the window.'

I looked through the window, and there was my dear wife and the director of the theatre where I had been working.

'Valentina, please do not worry,' I said. 'Everything will be quite all right. Go home now.'

In the morning an officer came and read out a list of names—including my own. These men, he said, were to be ready to leave for the station

in an hour's time. There was no time for talk. Every one was preparing and packing, and then we were assembled in the yard, where a band was waiting for us.

I asked a sergeant if I might go and say good-bye to my wife, but he said it was quite impossible. I was very sad.

We marched to the station, the band playing. People followed us, laughing and crying, waving good-bye to their brothers, husbands, and fathers.

At the station there were goods wagons waiting for us, but they had been provided with rough seats. Just as I was getting into one, I heard a small, tearful voice saying, 'Nicolai!'

It was my wife. I ran to her, and took her in my arms.

'Nicolai, you can't leave me like this. I cannot let you go. The war is still on, and you have had enough trouble in your life, my little one.' My poor wife, how she cried.

'Valentina, please be good and go home. I cannot possibly take you with me. I am a soldier now. And, Valentina, think of my brother. I am going to fight the Reds.'

It was time to go and the soldiers were shouting for me to get into the wagon.

'Nicolai, if you don't take me with you I will throw myself under the train. I mean it.'

Well, even by then I knew that if my wife said a thing she meant it. I looked round in agony. Some of the soldiers shouted: 'Quick, Coco, get her in here. Don't be afraid.'

The train was starting to move slowly off. Two soldiers reached out and each one took one of her hands and dragged her into the wagon. I jumped in after her.

The soldiers gave me blankets and coats to put over Valentina, in case we came to a station and were inspected by an officer. And at the first station a roll-call was made, but they did not find my wife. Then I was suddenly happy at having her, and started to sing. The soldiers joined in, and we sang many songs.

Sometimes we laughed, because my wife looked so funny. When she left home she had not had time to dress. All she had on was a night-gown, slippers, overcoat, and round her neck an old-fashioned gold chain with a bunch of keys.

It was a very slow journey. At eleven o'clock at night we arrived at a station called Jaun Gulbene. It was a three-mile walk to the old castle where we were to go, but there were two carts waiting for our luggage.

I went to one of the drivers and said to him: 'Please will you take my wife in the cart with you? I will pay you well. Please do, she cannot walk so far.'

He was a sour old man. He said: 'Since when is it allowed to take one's wife into the Latvian Army? Why did you not bring your mother-in-law with you? All right, get her in. Look sharp.'

I helped Valentina into the cart and then ran into line. Off we went.

It was cold and dark and very muddy. I did not mind so much. I was used to the army, but it was bad for the young lads only just joined.

When we came at last to the castle, the carts were already there. I ran to my wife and helped her down. She said: 'Don't worry, Nicolai, everything will be all right. The driver has promised me that he will take me to the caretaker of a big house near here. I will see you in the morning. I am with you, don't mind anything. Good night.'

I went into the castle. We slept in bunks in what had been a fine library. I was very tired after that long walk in the mud, but I could not sleep. I was sorry for myself, and sorry for my wife, and sad about everything.

Next morning, after breakfast and roll-call, we had to go one by one into an office. There an old major questioned me as to my name, age, and previous army record.

'Well,' he said, 'you are a young man but an old soldier. Have you had any other occupation?'

Then I told him that I was an artiste and I told him how I had first joined the army and what I had done since.

'Then you are a corporal?' he said, when I had shown him my medals.

'Yes, sir,' I said, and saluted him.

'Right. You may go now, and I will see what I can do for you.'

'But, sir,' I stammered, 'I don't want anything for myself. It is my wife—she is here with me.'

'What!' You should have seen that old major jump out of his seat.

'You mean to say she is here with you? How? When . . . ?'

So I told him all the story.

'Well! No wonder you are an artiste!'

In the end he told me I could go and see my wife, but that I must report back to him in the afternoon.

When I saw him in the afternoon, the kind old major said that my wife and I could look after the officers' club. My wife sold her gold chain and bought some new clothes. I had a new uniform and I put my corporal's stripes on it. Then I put on my medals, and I felt very proud of myself.

We did not stay very long at the officers' club, however, because the work was too hard for Valentina. And the responsibility of buying food was too much for me—it was very difficult in those days. So in the end my wife went back to Riga. I was put to being an instructor. Soldiers did not stay long at this place. They learnt, and then they went away to other places.

When I had been in the Latvian Army for about two years and four months, we heard that the War was over. How happy I was to be sent back to Riga.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### BONO BACK AGAIN

AFTER I had finished with the Latvian Army I joined the Circus Salamonski in Riga, and I worked there for six months. We were a happy company. Most of us had served in the War, and the gleaming lights, the smell of the ring, and the sound of the applause were a glorious relief and refreshment after bursting shells, the smell of death, and the whine of bullets. But I found that hands that had been used to handling rifle and bayonet were strangely clumsy when they first grasped the sticks of make-up.

Every fortnight I had to put on new comedies, and that was not easy. My partner then was a little girl of eight called Tamara. I had to teach her everything. During the first two or three days of a new comedy she would always do something wrong. She used to make me laugh, but not the audience. If we were doing a conjuring trick she would give it away before we started. But I was lucky, and could usually convince the audience that it was *not* a trick. And in the end we had quite a success.

In the same show there was an artiste called Arnoldi; he and his wife worked in a dancing act. One day he asked me if I would teach him a few acrobatics because he wanted to produce a new

acrobatic dance. He said he would pay me well, but I would not hear of it. It was such a little thing to do for them and it made me practise and perfect my own acrobatics. So I taught them, and they were very good.

One night when I was in the dressing-room the door-man came and told me that someone wanted to see me. At first I refused, as I was so busy. But the man refused to go away. And at last I told the door-man to let him in.

The door-man had said 'a gentleman,' but this apparition certainly didn't look like one. His clothes were funnier than mine, even, when I was turned out of the hospital in Petrograd. He was covered in mud, and evidently very tired. When he started to speak I had the queer feeling that I had seen him somewhere before.

'I've heard of you,' he said, 'and I've come a long way to see you. Perhaps you can help me.'

All the time the feeling that I knew him was growing on me. 'Let me introduce myself,' he went on. 'I am called Bono.'

Then I remembered. A circus, a small boy, and a bear running loose. And here was the man who had beaten me. He was going to ask me a favour.

I looked at him. He hadn't recognized me. Then I noticed how exhausted he looked. I asked him if he was hungry. He started to weep. I took him to the theatre café and gave him food and coffee. He was much too busy eating for some time to talk, and I didn't hurry him.

Then he told me how he was an artiste before the wars, and had trained bears and ponies. But the Bolsheviks had killed all the bears and ponies, and now he had no means of earning a living. With a lot of other artistes he had been in Dvinsk with nothing to do.

'I had heard of you,' he said, 'and decided that I would ask you if you could help a fellow-artiste.'

He got up wearily. 'I must go now, my wife and child are at the station waiting for me.'

I gave him some money to buy some food for his family and told him to be at the circus at the same time next day, and I would see what I could do for him. He thanked me with tears in his eyes and hurried off.

That night I told the other artistes the story of Bono, and of his present plight. They immediately made a collection among themselves for him. The same evening I went to the Artistes' Federation in Riga, and they also made a collection.

Next day I handed him the money: 'Oh, Coco, how can I thank you?' he said.

'That's all right,' I said. 'You've thanked me before.'

He looked surprised.

'Let me remind you of something—do you remember, years ago, a little boy letting your bear loose?'

'Indeed I do—it was when I was with the Circus Truzi.'

'And do you remember the beating you gave the boy?'

'How do you know about that?' he said in astonishment.

I laughed at him: 'I was that boy.'

He looked hard at me—I was without my make-up. 'You! Of course, I see now, Nicolai! Nicolai!'

'Yes,' I said, 'only I'm Coco now.'

He thanked me again. 'Don't,' I said. 'Artistes always want to help one another. To-day you're down, to-morrow it may be me.'

'I shall never forget your kindness,' he said, and turned and left me.

Some years after this, when I was working in a big circus in Lithuania, I had a letter from Bono. It was headed 'Bono's Circus,' in large black type. He told me that ever since he last saw me he had done well, and had eventually been able to start his own circus. He said he wanted to repay me for what I had done for him, and asked me if I would join his circus in Finland. He said that I could name my own price. I had to write and tell him that I was under contract in Lithuania, and could not join him, much as I should have liked to.

## CHAPTER XXX

### ACCIDENT AND CURE

WHEN I had finished my six months with this circus, I was engaged for one month to work in a circus in Lepaya. I was happy here too. So glad were we to be artistes again and not soldiers, that we would arrange afternoon rehearsals, performing our finest tricks, and each trying to outdo the other.

It was at one of these rehearsals that, for me, a tragedy happened, although to this day I don't know how. Somehow I slipped and strained my leg and side, and then—I could not walk, could not even move my leg. I went to many doctors, and some said one thing and some said another, but my leg got no better. I returned to Riga, and spent a lot of money and tried everything, but it still got no better. I had to refuse a contract with the same circus, and I felt as if my heart had died in me. After so many years of hard work, I was finished with the circus.

So one day I said to my wife: 'It is no good spending any more money. I do not feel that I shall ever be able to work as an artiste any more, so we must think of something else.'

By this time we had three children—Helen,

Michael, and a baby girl, Olga. So I had quite a big family to support.

So we thought things over and decided to open a little fruit shop. We sold fruit, cigarettes, sweets, and lemonade. The shop was on the corner of the house we lived in, and so I could get there quite comfortably on my crutches.

It was not a big business, but it made us a living. Although I did not feel much like laughing I sometimes had to smile at the idea of Coco keeping shop in a striped apron!

Some friends had suggested to me that it might do my leg good if I gave it a sun-bath, and so Valentina would come down to the shop for an hour or two, and I would sunbathe on the roof. And in a month or two it *did* feel better, but I still had to use a stick.

One morning, when I was sitting idly behind the counter, thinking, as I was nearly always thinking, of the circus, a man came in and bought some cigarettes. As he picked up his change he looked me full in the face, and started. 'Why, Coco, old fellow, it's *you*. How glad I am to see you again. I've been looking everywhere for you. I want to repay your kindness in teaching my wife and I to do acrobatics.'

It was Arnoldi!

'Yes, it's me,' I said sadly.

'Well, come round here, old fellow, we must talk business.'

'I can't walk without crutches,' I said, 'that is why I am selling lozenges instead of laughs.'

'Nonsense, we must get you back into the business. Now, I have a beer-garden at Kovno, and you must take an engagement there.'

I argued and pleaded that I could not walk and could not do justice to any act, and was afraid that I would let him down. But it was no good; he insisted.

'Be a sport,' he said. 'You are so clever that you will think of an act where you do not have to walk much. Do this for me.'

So at last I agreed. Arnoldi left then, leaving me some money in advance, and a fortnight to prepare an act.

Trembling with excitement, I told my wife all about it. She said: 'Of course you must go, Nicolai; mother and I can look after the shop.'

It was agreed that I should train little Helen, aged four, to help me in the act. For a fortnight we worked hard. Helen, dear little soul, was as good as gold, and I only hoped she would be as good when we got to Kovno, which is in Lithuania.

She was. The first night I said to her: 'If you do your part all right to-night, darling, I will buy you a big doll to-morrow.'

She was the success of the evening, and gradually Helen and I rose to be the stars of the programme. And I did not forget to buy her a big doll.

One day when I was sitting in the sun near the beer-garden, an elderly gentleman came up to me, and talked to me about my injury. He told me that he was a doctor and could cure me. I had

been to so many doctors that I didn't take him very seriously. But one day he took me to his laboratory and showed me a lot of very elaborate electrical apparatus. And in the end he did cure me.

I had found out that he was a very important specialist. And so I was rather nervous when I asked him about payment.

He smiled at me: 'My fee is just the number of laughs you have given me. I am well paid.'

There is a funny sequel to my cure. When I was able to put on a proper act, the audience only applauded faintly, soon became restive, and clamoured for the old novelty act in which I never moved from my chair!

## CHAPTER XXXI

### TAMARA'S FALL

WHEN I was in Kaunas I received an offer to appear in a small town about a hundred and twenty-five miles away. It was the annual sports festival of the town. Although the show was only for one day, the terms I was offered were very good, and so I decided to go. I was to appear as a clown, and also to do acrobatic turns.

Such a crowd of us there were at the station—my wife and Tamara, her young sister, my son Michael, and my two daughters Helen and Olga, to say nothing of myself!

It was a Friday when we arrived, and the festival was to take place on the Sunday. However, it so happened that it never took place that week at all. I will tell you why.

Living in a farm on the outskirts of the town was a farmer. Some time previously he had been bitten by a mad dog, and as a result of this he had frequent attacks of madness. During these terrible attacks his two sons had to chain him up. He was released when he was sane again.

He had an attack on the Saturday after we arrived there. Before his sons could stop him, he picked up his three-year-old granddaughter and threw her to the ground, killing her instantly.

As soon as the horrible news reached the town, four policemen went out to the farm, tied up the farmer, and took him away to the police station, where he was kept for his own safety and that of other people. Very soon the station was surrounded by curious people who wanted to see the monster. I was among them, for I also wanted to see him. Sunday was to be a day of mourning, and so the festival was put off until the following week.

The next Sunday morning the town was awake early. In the morning there was a procession through the town. It was headed by a brass band of eight instruments. After the band came the firemen, policemen, and all the athletes and wrestlers taking part in the sports. As there was only one street to the town, the procession didn't take very long, and it then made its way to the park which had been prepared for the festival.

In a large open space, tents had been erected, a platform built for dancing, and a large circle roped off. There was a large crowd—farmers and others had come in from the country on horseback—and there were many strangers there. There were wrestling matches, sword fights, races—both on foot and on horseback—and in between times amateur artistes, jugglers, tumblers, and acrobats kept the crowd amused.

I had to appear four times, twice to do my clowning, and twice to do acrobatics and tumbling. After this came the free-for-all events. Sack races, greasy poles, races for men, races for women, and races for children.

What a noise there was of laughing and talking. Friends shouted to one another, children laughed and cried, their parents ate and drank and made merry.

My second appearance as an acrobat included a balancing act. For this I had Tamara for partner. My first act was to balance a sword, point down, on my forehead, and then a chair on top of the sword handle. This act was always very popular.

Disaster came to us in my last turn. I had to balance a fifteen-foot pole on my forehead. Then Tamara climbed on to my shoulder and then to the top of the pole. For this turn I never carried a special pole, as it would have been too big and clumsy to carry about, so I would borrow a pole beforehand.

As usual, I carefully examined this pole, and we started the act. I hoisted the pole on to my forehead and balanced it. How the crowd cheered. But when they saw Tamara climb on to my shoulder and start to go up the pole, they were silent. They had never seen anything like this before. Suddenly I felt a strange jarring feeling on my forehead, and the pole started to shake. Women screamed and men shouted. There was a loud crack! The pole had broken in two. And Tamara was almost at the top.

The shock of the pole breaking threw me off my balance, but I picked myself up and rushed to where Tamara lay very still, blood running out of her mouth. She had been flung about eighteen

feet to the ground. I thought she was dead. Someone called for a doctor, and he soon pushed his way through the crowd that had gathered round. Two firemen carried Tamara into a tent, and there the doctor examined her.

I did not know how to bear the suspense. At last the doctor said: 'She won't die. One of her lungs is damaged, and she is suffering from shock. She must be taken to bed and kept quiet.'

It was only a few minutes' walk to where we were staying, and the two firemen picked her up gently and carried her home.

I had to go and put on my make-up, ready for my act as a clown, although I was so worried I hardly knew what I was doing. And that is how it always is—tragedy and sorrow, but still the show must go on.

As soon as the show was over I hurried home. Tamara was in bed, with my wife nursing her, and, to my relief, she seemed quite cheerful. When the doctor saw her next morning, he told us that she would have to stay quietly in bed for several weeks.

I had not thought of staying in the village for so long, but as Tamara could not be moved I should have to look for something to do there. I tried to open a show of my own, but there were a great many difficulties. The greatest was that I had to obtain official permission, being a foreigner. Twice I wrote to the authorities in a neighbouring town, asking permission, but I never

had any reply. A month passed in this way, until I had only a very little money left.

I decided to telephone to Kaunas and see if I could get a contract there. I went to the post office, and found that I had just enough money for the call. I rang up the theatre where I had worked, and asked for the manager. I asked him if he could give me a job.

'What!' he said. 'You want a contract over the telephone? If you want a job, come to Kaunas and see me.' With that, he hung up his receiver.

Now I was in a fix. I had no money, and I *had* to get to Kaunas. I went home and told my wife about it, and we talked it over. But we could see no way of raising the money to pay my fare.

At last I had an idea. I had made friends with an unemployed carpenter in the town, and he had been a good friend to me, helping me as much as he could, although he was so poor. I went and told him about the fix I was in, and he said he would help me. I asked him to go to the cycle shop and borrow two cycles. We would cycle to Kaunas. My friend was well known, and he went to the shop and told the man that we wanted to go to the next town, where I was to get a contract. After a lot of arguing we got the bicycles.

We took them home, and Valentina prepared us some food and drink for the journey. About four o'clock in the afternoon we set off.

When we had gone a few miles it started to rain, and very soon we were wet through. As night came on, it started to get cold. I was not used to cycling, and very soon I was aches and pains all over.

Never shall I forget that ride! Once we stopped to rest, and to get something to eat and drink. When I tried to mount the bicycle again the pain was almost more than I could bear. My poor friend was in as bad a state as myself. We decided not to dismount again until we reached Kaunas, because we knew if we did we should not be able to remount.

The road had become very bad, until at last it was little better than a muddy track. We had no lights, and it was so dark we often found ourselves in the muddy ditches at either side of the road. Alas for our decision not to dismount! It became so muddy that we had to get off and push our cycles. Then it became even worse, and sometimes we had to pick them up and carry them, because the mud was up to our knees. We became speechless with misery. And all the time it rained.

At last it began to get daylight. My friend said that we ought to be getting near Kaunas. I hoped so. I would gladly have lain down in the mud to rest.

Towards eleven o'clock we came in sight of the town. That was the best sight I have ever seen. We rode through the town until we came to the theatre. Here I literally fell off my cycle.

I rubbed some of the mud off my legs, and, staggering inside, asked for the manager. While I waited, I tried to straighten my legs. My back I couldn't straighten—it felt as though it would break.

When the manager saw me he laughed. 'Why, Coco, you *do* look funny! What have you been doing?'

But I was in no mood for laughing. All I wanted was a contract. 'What about this job for me?' I said.

'Come into the office and we'll talk business.'

In the office he told me that he could give me a contract for a month.

'Why didn't you tell me that over the telephone?' I said, not feeling too pleased.

'But you can't sign contracts over the telephone!' he said.

Well, we fixed things up, and he gave me some money in advance. I went to my poor friend outside. We went to a café and had a really good meal. Then we went to the station, and I bought him and the cycles tickets home. I also gave him enough money to pay for the hire of the cycles, some for himself, and enough to get my wife and family to Kaunas.

Then I sent her a telegram, telling her to go to the post office so that I could speak to her on the telephone. The first thing she said was that a policeman had been to the house to arrest me for stealing the bicycles, but she had told him I was in the next town, still trying to get work. I

told her joyfully that everything was all right, that my friend was returning with the cycles and money for her to come to Kaunas.

In a few days' time we were all reunited in Kaunas, and very happy we were there, while I was in this job.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### A DREAM AND ITS END

AT last, after much hard work and much screwing and scraping to save money, I found that I had saved enough to realize a dream that I had cherished all through those desperate War years, yes, and even when I was a cripple in the little shop—to start a circus of my own.

It had to be what you call a 'hire-purchase' show. I just had enough money to pay the first deposit on a little circus and motor lorry, and I had to give a number of IOUs, which I redeemed when the circus began to pay. It was a small affair; we could only seat two hundred and fifty people at a time; but of course to us there had never been such a circus, and never will be again.

I gathered together a company of artistes, but to economize I had to do as many turns as I could myself. We worked, these artistes and I, not as employer and employed, but as friends. There was Victor the Boneless Wonder, Ivan the Fire-eater, my wife and daughter, one small dog, and the tent boys. You may be interested to see a sample programme of the Coco Variety-Circus. Here it is:

- (1) Conjuring tricks by Coco.
- (2) Victor the Boneless Wonder, in amazing contortions.

- (3) Speciality act by Coco and daughter.
- (4) Ivan the Fire-eater, in his stupendous act.
- (5) Acrobatic display by Coco.
- (6) The Strongest Woman in the World—  
allows four men to stand on her chest!
- (7) Comedy duo—Coco and partner.

As well as this, I would work with the other artistes, helping them to pull-up and pull-down. I would attend to the duties of ring-master and tent-master. I would paste posters on the hoardings. And I would supervise all the business, and see that Valentina was getting along all right in the pay-box. Sometimes I would even stand outside the tent and attract the people in.

It was hard work, and when the day was over I sometimes felt I was too tired to stand. But as I sat under the stars, smoking a last pipe, and stroking our performing dog, Floki, I was soothed by the purple mystery of the Lithuanian night, and felt that life was good and my work worth while.

Our wanderings took us to very remote parts of Lithuania, where the peasants had never seen a circus before. They would come from miles around to the little towns where we played. They would walk to the towns wearing rough sabots, but when they reached the town boundary they would stop, wash their feet, and put on the boots that they had carried round their necks. In a Lithuanian village a pair of boots has to last fifteen years!

Our turns delighted the peasants, but there

was a good mixture of amazement and alarm in their delight. They would always cross themselves before they entered the tent. The sight of Ivan eating fire made some of the women scream and gave them hysterics.

One night we had a happening that took me back many years in my memory—back to the Circus Truzi, and a terrible storm at Vilno. Much the same thing happened to us here in Lithuania.

After the performance had begun a storm broke, and the wind and rain beat terribly on our big top.

'No, it won't hold!' said Ivan, peering out into the black fury of the night.

'We must hold it,' I said. 'Get mackintoshes, all of you!'

So, as in Vilno so many years ago, while the audience laughed inside the tent, each artiste, as he finished in the ring, dashed outside to hold the ropes. Then he would shake the water from his hair, and tumble inside again with a gaiety he didn't feel.

When the audience had got safely away, we were all too tired to hold on any more, and when we let go the tent collapsed into a jumble of sodden canvas.

But we were young and confident. And, when next morning the sun shone brightly from an innocent blue sky, we set to work happily, sewing, repairing, rebuilding.

But life had bigger troubles than a falling tent in store for me.

One of the acts I did in my own circus was a balancing speciality with a samovar. On a table I placed this shining tea-urn. This table only had only leg, and then I would proceed to balance the table on my forehead. Suddenly I would strike the table away from under the samovar and catch the samovar as it fell. The thrilling part about this act was that the samovar was filled with boiling water, ready for the making of tea.

Although it was, of course, a risky business, it wasn't too risky to a man with steady hands and a good sense of timing.

When the accident happened we were playing before an audience of children. The little ones had come miles to see my circus. I love children, and the sound of their happy laughter was like a draught of wine to me.

I came on to do my samovar act. How their eyes widened as I put the urn on the table, and then the table on my forehead.

'Allez——'

Away went the table, down came the samovar, and I caught it as it fell. But it was an old samovar. One of the handles broke.

I was drenched from chest to knees with boiling water. I cannot understand why I did not faint. Through my agony I could hear shrieks of laughter from the children. They thought it the loveliest part of the business, that the funny man in the ring should be drenched with water.

The world went round before my eyes, spinning

and shaking. I bowed, and tried to smile. Steaming and staggering, I made my exit.

I dropped to the ground outside the ring door. Ivan and Victor ran up to me, looking pale and horrified.

And when they took off my costume my skin came away with it.

I was rushed into hospital. There the doctors shook their heads gravely. Days later, when I had recovered enough to mutter something about going back to work, they smiled.

'My friend, you have had a miraculous escape. It will be at least three months before you can think of moving.'

'But, my show, my show . . .'

'You are lucky to have your life. Now lie still.'

I lay in that little country hospital, wondering, and worrying and worrying. Valentina and the children, Ivan and Victor, and even little Floki, my dog, came to see me. All the time I could see the same unspoken question in their eyes. How could the show carry on?

Silent and deserted, the tent stood on the outskirts of the town, the fading flags and banners flapping sadly in the wind. Winter came, and the wind piled the snow up round the silent circus. Snow leaked through the canvas, and water dripped on to the empty seats.

And then, one dark morning that winter, the owners came and took away my little canvas world—I had not been able to keep up the payments.

Soon Ivan came to say good-bye to me. Poor Ivan, he was sorry to leave, but a fire-eater cannot live on fire alone. Victor too left for an engagement in Riga. When the tent workers deserted me, many of the props and costumes went with them.

And with them also went the laughing proprietor, who was also a clown, leaving a pale, pain-racked invalid who tossed and turned on his narrow hospital bed, wondering whether he would recover before his wife and children felt the first pangs of hunger.

Outside the little town, only a faint muddy circle on the ground marked the place where had once stood the Coco Variety-Circus.

## CHAPTER XXXIII

### A TERRIBLE JOURNEY

LYING there in the hospital, still suffering badly from my scalds, I reached a depth of despair that I cannot even now bear to think of. My circus and caravan were gone, it would be some time before I could do any sort of work again, and I had a wife and young children to keep from starvation.

But when my little remaining bit of money was nearly gone and I did not know where to go for more, the wheel of fortune turned just a little, just enough to give me a ray of hope in my darkness. A friend of mine at Abeli, a little town about twenty-five miles distant, took my wife and children under his roof.

For a little while longer I lay content in the hospital, knowing that they were being cared for. But soon a desperate urge to get to my family came over me, and, resist it as I might, I knew I must go.

How was I to make the journey? There was no railway service between the two towns and no motor service. A blizzard had raged over the whole countryside, and every night biting winds blew fresh drifts over the frozen roads.

In Abeli, my wife did all she could to get someone to fetch me. She walked through the town,

beseeching some driver to do it for her, but they all shook their heads, though regretfully—the roads were too bad, the snow too deep.

She had given up hope when she met an old peasant. He had a sledge and one horse. He listened to her story. He thought for a bit, and then he said: 'I will try and do it for these children—I cannot bear to see them cry so. I will try and bring their father back.'

He got things ready, and they drove to the hospital, my wife in the sledge with him. By the time they got to me another blizzard was blowing up.

'We cannot possibly release the patient to-day, when such a blizzard is blowing up!' said the doctors.

But I insisted. 'I *must* go,' I said, 'and if my friend here can risk it, so can I.'

So, shaking their heads sadly, the doctors wrapped me in a covering of cotton-wool. They said that I must lie very still, because my burns were not yet all properly healed.

I said good-bye to them—they had been very good to me—and I was put gently on the sledge wrapped up in rugs, and we began the journey home.

What a journey! We set out slowly, the old horse plodding steadily through the drifts. When we reached the plains, a biting, howling wind caught us, lashing our faces with its burden of stinging snow. Suddenly we were in a chaotic white world of whirling snowflakes. We could see

only a few feet before us. I hunched myself up under the rugs.

There was a lurch, the sledge sank through a drift, and I was out on the snow. I writhed my tortured body in the drift, but I was powerless to move by myself. The driver lifted me back again, and on we went.

Across this plain ran dikes. These were now frozen, and, covered with snow, were the greatest menace to our safety. Sometimes the sledge would skid badly, and this would almost knock the old horse off its legs. I was terrified lest we should leave the road, plunge through the drifts, and fall into a frozen dike. I fell out of the sledge three times, and three times they lifted me back. By that time I was numb with the cold, otherwise I could not have stood the agony of those falls.

But worse was to come. When we had done about half of this terrible journey a particularly vicious blast of wind struck us. Our gallant old horse staggered, tottered a few more paces, and then fell into the snow.

The peasant was out of the sledge and by its side in a moment. I shall never forget the tragic look on his old face as he looked up at us through the driving snow. I caught the words: '. . . dead . . . dead.'

How we lived through that night I do not know. We all huddled together in the sledge, pulling the rugs and skins over us. Sometimes the heat of my body would ebb to that level when the

mind reels and wanders through dreams and fantasies, and I would dream I was back in the circus. I would hear the crowd laughing, and then the samovar, possessed of an evil personality, would pour its boiling water all over me . . . the crowd roared with delight. Then the laughing changed to the howling of the wind, and I would wake with a start, and huddle closer to my wife.

Fortunately the next day was market day at the little town we were trying to reach, and people were about earlier than they would have been on an ordinary day. About six o'clock in the morning the blizzard had almost blown itself out, and we saw a sledge coming towards us. Its only occupant was a burly farmer. His surprise and distress on seeing our plight was almost comical. He lifted me on to his sledge, and Valentina sat with me. Then he motioned to our old peasant to get on too. The old man shook his head, still looking at the stiff body of his horse, now only a white mound on the road.

'No!' he said. 'Please send back some help. I will stay here.' And nothing would move him.

I looked back as we drove off, and caught a fleeting glimpse of the poor old fellow sitting forlornly on the sledge, watching that sad white hump in the road.

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### LAUGH, CLOWN, LAUGH

FOR a long time I lay very ill at Abeli. That terrible journey had taken me back many weeks.

But as soon as I grew stronger I began to think of my work and how I could earn some money to support my family. I wondered how, in that small town, I could earn enough to make a show worth while.

But my friends were good to me. One morning I designed some posters, saying that Coco, the famous clown, had recovered from his accident, and would give me a benefit performance in the tiny local theatre, to be followed by a country dance arranged by my kind friends. They had the posters done for me and arranged all the distribution.

The famous clown was far from well—my burns smarted badly when I was doing my tumbling—but the show was a great success, and so was the dance that followed. And the pain and discomfort was forgotten in the fact that I was working again.

Soon after this, I saved enough money to get us to Königsberg, where I felt we should have a better chance.

In Königsberg I did an act with my daughter and my dog, Floki. I did so well here that I was soon able to buy new costumes and other props, and so many contracts were offered me that it was impossible to fulfil them all. Each evening we gave shows in several different places.

But although I was doing so well, I was not satisfied. My ambition was to get to Berlin. I approached Paul Spadoni—a world-famous booking-agent for circus and variety. He replied that it was impossible to book any acts without him seeing them, and that if I wanted an engagement I should have to go to Berlin and see him.

After much discussion it was decided that our whole family should move to Berlin. What excitement there was among my small sons and daughters! There were five of them then—Helen, aged eight and a half; Michael, seven; Olga, six; Nadia, four; and Sonia, the baby, aged two and a half... And then, of course, there was my dog, Floki.

We reached Berlin in the late evening. There was no time to look for rooms, so that night we stayed in an hotel near the station. Next morning I went to look for rooms. How difficult it was—as soon as I mentioned that we had five children I was told it was impossible. In Berlin every one seemed astonished that any one should have five children!

But at last we found rooms and settled down. Then I went to see Spadoni. He was very interested in my act. He asked me how old Helen

was. I told him that she was nearly nine. He looked up sharply.

'Impossible. Don't you know that in Germany children under fourteen are not allowed to work?'

What was I to do? Without Helen my turn was nothing, and I couldn't train another assistant in time.

'Well,' said Spadoni, 'you may be able to get permission from the authorities for Helen to work.'

The Department of Education refused the permit. Day after day I tried various departments to see if I could get it. By now my money was almost used up, and at last I had to sell Floki. This nearly broke my heart, and the whole family was in tears, but it couldn't be helped, and I had to have money.

When I tried the Department of Education again they were sympathetic, and when I told them that if I couldn't get the permit then my whole family would starve, they agreed at last to sign the necessary permit.

It seemed then as if my luck had turned again. I obtained a contract with various picture houses, and gave a turn at two of them every evening. In the end I had given turns at fifty-four picture houses, and in some cases had returned two or three times.

At last I attained the height of my ambition—an engagement with the Circus Busch. In those days it was the largest circus in Europe. While I was working there I was approached by a film

studio representative and asked if I would do my turn in a film. It was called *Katterina Knie*. I agreed, and for the next three weeks I had a very busy time. At nine o'clock in the morning Helen and I had to report at the film studios, which were some little way out of Berlin. At seven in the evening we finished at the studios, and I had to report at the Circus Busch.

However, although the work was hard, I was happy. I was making a success, and I was making much money. And during this already busy time, our youngest son, Sasha, was born. As soon as I had finished the first film, I was engaged for the first talking picture made by the famous singer Richard Tauber. It was called *I Believe no more in Women*. I was paid one hundred marks a day for this, and with my salary from the circus, I was indeed making a fortune.

But money is not everything, and happiness and a fortune do not always go together, and, for me, I have often found that if I have one I do not always have the other.

Soon after this time, when everything seemed to be going so well, Valentina fell ill. I hoped she would soon be better because one of my small daughters had been taken ill, too. But she grew worse, and was taken to hospital in the afternoon to undergo a severe operation.

Before I went to the circus in the evening, I telephoned to the hospital. I thought they would never answer. At last I heard an answer.

'This is Nicolai Poliakoff—my wife—how is she now?'

'We are very sorry, your wife is unconscious. We shall soon be operating. Can you come and be with her, in case she should want you?'

How could I go? The eager audience was already going into the circus, chattering and laughing, ready to top a good dinner with a good show. And the clowns at the Circus Busch were so funny!

I knew what that hesitating voice at the hospital had meant—they were afraid my wife would die. I fitted on my wig and I pulled on the silly ballet skirt and tights that I used in my boxing act. The dark thoughts crowded into my brain. If she died, my Valentina, what should I do? And our six children? The door opened, and I heard the music which told me that my time had come to enter the ring.

At the ring entrance, the ring-master gave me a sympathetic look. A little Chinese girl, a juggler, patted me on the shoulder: 'Cheer up, poor Coco.'

Once in the ring, I went quite mechanically through all the gags that led up to my act. All the lights, the faces of the audience, the shadows, danced before me in a blur. Then the time came for our boxing act. My partner came up to me and we began to spar. When he hit me in the face, I tumbled in the ring. There was a roar of laughter. But I saw a faintly puzzled expression on my partner's face.

I realized that I should have ducked that blow,

and returned him a straight right that was his cue for a comical tumble. We began again. I fell over again and again. Sometimes I would remember a little bit of my act, but most of the time I could see and hear nothing, my mind was away in the hospital where life and death were fighting a battle that meant everything to me and my children.

Suddenly I found that there were tears rolling down my cheeks. A clown in tears, what a grotesque idea! This made me very angry, and I sparred and tumbled in a frenzy of hysterical desperation.

It was over; somehow I got out of the ring and into my dressing-room. Safely there, I broke down and cried like my youngest child might have done. The tears ran down my face and made a terrible mess of my make-up.

The ring-master put his head round the door. 'You were simply splendid, Coco. The management wishes to see you afterwards.'

Then he saw that I was crying. 'Coco, everything will turn out all right, you'll see. And there will be a long contract in this for you.'

He tried to cheer me up for a little while, and then, shrugging his shoulders, he went back to the ring. He also had work to do.

I telephoned the hospital again. There was no news; my wife was still unconscious. Then I had to go back into the ring to repeat my strange performance. This was the first time in my life that I had no joy in my work.

But at midnight there was good news. The operation had been successful, and my wife was asleep. I cried again, with relief this time.

For the rest of my time at the Circus Busch, all my spare moments were spent going from one hospital to another, seeing my wife and my daughter, and trying to look after my other children, and trying to keep them amused and cheered. It was a long time before all my little family were together again.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### A VISIT TO ENGLAND

WHEN my Berlin season with the Circus Busch ended, they offered me a contract with the circus for the Christmas season at Breslau. This I accepted, feeling that now I was really established in the circus.

A day or two after this I had a card from my agent, Wilschke, asking me to call at his office. I arrived there, and he at once introduced me to Mr Willi Schumann, the equestrian director of Bertram Mills's circus in London.

'Well, Coco,' said Wilschke, 'Mr Schumann wants you to accept a contract to work in Manchester, in England, as a clown.'

Before I could say anything, Willi Schumann said: 'Ha, but I know you, you will want some fantastic salary!'

'No, you do not know Coco,' said Wilschke, 'tell him your proposal and see what he has to say.'

So Schumann told me his proposal. It included a contract, at a good salary, at the City Hall, Manchester, and my passage to and from England.

But a thought struck me: 'How can I work in England if I cannot speak English?' I said.

'Don't worry about that; you'll learn English,' said Schumann.

'And I have a contract for the Christmas season at Breslau,' I said.

'That can be all fixed up,' said Wilschke.

I had almost agreed, but I asked for a few days to talk it over with my wife.

When I talked the matter over with Valentina, she said that I must certainly go to England, so I went to see the management of the Circus Busch, and they let me off my contract when they heard of the offer I had had. Then I went straight to Mr Schumann and accepted his offer. So on 15th December 1929, I left my wife and family in Berlin, and travelling through Hamburg and Grimsby, I came to Manchester in England.

Although I could speak six or seven other languages, I could not speak a word of English, and when I reached England I did wonder how I should get on. I made friends with a clown called Toto. After a few days he came to me and said: 'You are new here, Coco, I wonder how you would like to taste some real English food?'

'Very much,' I said. 'Take me along with you.'

Toto took me to a restaurant, and there I had what Toto considered to be real English food—fish and chips.

The next day I could not find Toto, and as I felt hungry, I went alone to the same restaurant. When the waitress came to me, I made signs in dumb show—signs that people will understand all the world over.

'Ah,' she said, 'you want fish and chips.'

And it was very nice. On the third and fourth days, she just smiled at me, and brought me a plate of fish and chips.

When I went in to the restaurant on the eighth day, I ran up to the waitress before she could go and bring me my fish and chips, and I held her by the arm and took her up to a man at the next table who was eating roast meat and vegetables. Then I pointed to his plate and then at my mouth, until the astonished girl understood what I meant.

After that, although my meals were dependent on the tastes of the other diners, I managed to get a fairly varied diet. And then I began to speak a little English. But from that day to this I have never eaten fish and chips.

About three weeks after I had reached Manchester, Mr Mills offered me a contract for the summer tour of the circus, which was to open at Luton just before Easter. So far I had much liked England, especially the audiences, and everybody had been so kind to me. I accepted the contract.

At the end of my five weeks' contract I went back to Berlin. How lovely it was to see my wife and children again. While I was there I obtained a contract to appear with Helen on the stage of the various picture houses that were showing *Katterina Knie*—the film that Helen and I had appeared in. I think we were very successful.

During this time, Valentina and I had many

plans to talk over. We decided that it was impossible to take all six children to England. Eventually it was arranged that we should take Helen and Michael, the two eldest. My wife took the four youngest, Olga, Sonia, Nadia, and Sasha the baby, to her mother's home in Riga, and made arrangements to leave them there with her during my stay in England.

So one day, early in April, the four of us and our luggage left Berlin, and I arrived once more in England.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### BERTRAM MILLS'S CIRCUS

WHEN we arrived in England, we went straight to Luton. I don't quite know what I had expected this English circus to be like, but when I walked on to the ground at Luton I was amazed. I had never seen such an enormous canvas 'big top.' I expect you know that the big top is the tent where the performance takes place. In Russia the big tops had wooden walls, with just a dirty canvas top. But this one was all canvas, and beautiful white canvas, too.

So big was this big top, that it was in six pieces. These had to be laced together before the canvas was put up, and it took a great many men to do this; it took a man to every foot of canvas to pull it together. When the pieces were laced together, they had to be fastened to the big iron bale-rings round the 'king poles'—the king poles are the main poles that support the big top—and then hauled to the top of the king poles. This is done from inside. Then the 'quarter poles' are put into position. These are each forty feet high, and make an angle between the ground and the big top. They are not fastened to the ground, because if they were they would probably snap in windy weather. All round the 'walls' of the

big top there are stout timbers thirteen feet high. These are placed at intervals of four feet.

Then I went to look at the stables and the horses. Many times I had slept in places not so good as these stables for comfort. The stables were spotlessly clean, and all the horses and ponies were groomed until they shone like silk. Near the stables were the forage tent and the saddler's shop. Men were busy in the forage tent preparing the food for each animal, which had its own portable manger. A lot of the animals had their own special individual likes and dislikes, and there are always some animals on a special diet.

The saddler's shop was full of bridles—bridles of all colours and all sizes, saddles, and odd pieces of coloured leather, bright steel studs.

All the lorries and motors were parked in one place. These are painted a brilliant red and green. At the other side of the big top, near the entrance, is the fire tent, and the circus's own fire engine.

I went back to the circus after dark. If I had been astonished before, I could hardly believe my eyes now. Never before had I seen such lighting. I could hardly believe it was a circus. It looked like something from a fairy story. Every tent, caravan, office, dressing-room, had its own light. There were 'street' lights, so that the men and the visitors could see their way about, and over all were myriads of tiny coloured lights, the whole front of the tent being studded with them. I learnt later that over two thousand lights are used.

My partner clown, Toto Brasso, had arrived in Luton two days before I had, and that evening he introduced me to the circus. Every one was very friendly and made me feel at home at once—never before had I shaken hands so much!

As we were walking home, I said to Toto: 'And who is that Mr Pleasetermeetcher, and what does he do?'

'Who?' said Toto, and then began to laugh. 'That was Dickie Kayes, the English clown,' he said.

'But when you introduced us and I said: "Coco," he said: "Pleasetermeetcher."'

Toto roared with laughter. 'In England,' he said, 'when two people are introduced, they say, "How do you do?" or "Pleased to meet you," and not, as we do on the Continent, shake hands and each say his own name. Do you understand?'

'Yes, I think so,' I said.

But Toto could see that I didn't understand very well, and he said: 'Never mind, Coco, you will soon learn English, and get used to English ways and customs.'

Next day I was introduced to Mr Bernard and Mr Cyril, the two sons of the late Mr Bertram Mills. They spoke to me in German, and hoped that I should be happy and comfortable during my stay with the circus. And I was.

## CHAPTER XXXVII

### WHISTLES, BEARS, AND TIGERS

THE opening day at Luton, the opening of the summer tour, I was more nervous than I had been for many years. I had worked in the circus for twenty-four years, but I had never seen a circus like this one. But the chief reason for my nervousness was that I had to speak in the ring, and I didn't know a single word of English.

Crowds of people were pouring into the big top—grown-ups and children, laughing and chattering. Inside they were hurrying to their seats, buying programmes, hunting for lost tickets, laughing and jostling each other. The band, gay in their bright uniforms, were playing all the popular tunes of the day.

The big top was new, everything was new and freshly painted. All the hands walked about in new uniforms.

Behind the scenes everything was hurry and bustle. The artistes were putting the finishing touches to their costumes and make-up. It was the opening day, and everything must be perfect. In the stables everything was shining and spotless. The horses and their trappings were cleaned and polished until they shone like silver.

And in his box sat Mr Bertram Mills, a blue

cornflower in his buttonhole. With him were Mr Bernard and Mr Cyril Mills.

At last the show began. I thought I had never seen such a wonderful show. Every act was perfect. Most of them spectacular. And I think I was a success. The people laughed at me, and I was glad. I had a feeling then that I was going to stay a long time in England.

When the show was over, the applause told us more certainly than anything that the summer tour had opened successfully.

I enjoyed that summer tour. Your England, which I hope is now my England too, can be so beautiful in all her moods. And on the tenting trail there are always plenty of adventures, and comedy too.

I remember one unplanned comedy—it concerned Rolly the midget clown and myself. We had an act in which Rolly entered the ring from one side, and I entered it from the other. We would walk round the ring whistling like birds—shrilly. Then we met in the middle. The point was that we had tiny whistles in our mouths, and we could imitate words in whistles—as though two thrushes or blackbirds had adapted their whistles to human speech, if you can understand.

This act was always very successful. But one night at Nottingham the funniest effect of all was lost on the crowd. I was whistling away happily and Rolly was whistling back. Suddenly his whistling stopped. I thought he had missed his cue, and I repeated my note. But Rolly walked

up to me, looking very solemn. So funny was the midget's expression it was all I could do to stop laughing.

'What's the matter?' I whispered.

His expression was anguished.

'Coco,' he whispered in German, 'I've swallowed my whistle!'

And he had, too! We gagged the rest of the act quite successfully. In the dressing-room we all crowded round Rolly. We shook our heads over him. Sometimes an artiste would bend down to listen to Rolly breathing. He would secretly whistle. And we would all shout: 'Poor old Rolly, did you hear it?'

As a matter of fact swallowing the whistle never did Rolly any harm, beyond the temporary fright.

But, of course, being on the road with a circus is not all comedy and romance. Sometimes it snows when the sun should be shining. There are storms. In my mind there are pictures of men hanging grimly on to ropes which hold canvas that the wind is trying to tear to shreds. Pictures of caravans and lorries stuck in the mud; the whole company digging trenches to carry away the water from a cloudburst.

There is tragedy too, and sometimes lives are lost. I shall never forget the day in Hastings during this, my first summer tour, when Adolph Cosmeyer lost his life. Carl Cosmeyer and his son Adolph had five large polar bears and two black mountain bears housed in three large travelling

cages. Polar bears are always dangerous, and owing to the heat these were very bad-tempered. My wife and I at that time kept a refreshment buffet in the circus ground, and as I was standing there talking to Carl Cosmeyer, my wife came running in.

'Oh, Nicolai! Nicolai! the bears!' she said, and fainted at my feet.

Cosmeyer and I ran to the stables. It was a terrible scene we saw. In front of one of the huge cages was a groom. He was trying to pull the body of Adolph Cosmeyer from the cage. But every time he nearly succeeded, one of the bears pulled the boy back into the cage with its huge paws. We tried to help. Carl was frantic, and at last we succeeded. Poor Adolph. He was terribly mauled, and he only lived ten minutes.

No one had seen what actually happened. Carl had warned Adolph not to go into the cages, but it was known that Adolph, worried by the bears' discomfort in the heat, had decided to give them a cold shower with the hose.

That day the circus did not open. But nobody thought of blaming the bears; and the next day Carl Cosmeyer continued working with them.

This tragic happening reminded me of an occurrence which might have been tragic but was just funny. It had happened when I was working in a circus in Moscow. One day, after the band had finished rehearsing, the 'cellist stayed behind in the ring to practise by himself. I was in the balcony and had been rehearsing my act.

I had just decided to leave the 'cellist to his practising, when I heard voices outside.

'Look out! The tiger is loose!'

Before I could leave the balcony, I heard a sort of coughing noise. I looked down. I saw the tiger come into the ring and walk across to the 'cellist.

Suddenly the 'cellist saw the tiger. If I hadn't been so worried I should have laughed. His mouth dropped open, his eyes bulged. He was like a man turned to stone. The tiger walked up. He sniffed at him once or twice, and then, for all the world like a huge cat, he rubbed himself against the 'cellist's legs. He did this once or twice, and then walked out of the opposite side of the ring.

He was eventually captured without any trouble or mishap, but I don't think that 'cellist ever felt quite the same about cats again.

## CHAPTER XXXVIII

### ON THE ROAD IN ENGLAND

THE summer tour of the circus is, of course, a miracle of perfect organization. For seven months the circus has to be like a small town, complete and self-sufficient, supporting nearly three hundred men and women, to say nothing of children.

The whole route is planned and timed before the tour starts. About two weeks before the circus is due to arrive at a town, the advance guard arrives. This consists of the advertising department, responsible for billing the town, and the advance booking-office. This is a large omnibus.

A few days before the circus, the second advance party arrives. This is the signal for the advertising department to pack up their things and go on to the next town. The second party continues with the publicity and advance bookings, and stays until the circus arrives.

Next come the tent-master and his men—twenty to twenty-five of them. They go to the ground and measure up the area required for the big top and the stables, etc. Helped by labourers employed from the town, the job of driving in stakes for the big top commences. So

by the time the circus arrives everything is ready for its immediate erection.

The circus usually arrives at the ground about six o'clock in the morning. The first train consists of the big top and a whole army of workers, carpenters, electricians, blacksmiths, ring boys, and a host of others. They first of all have breakfast, which has been prepared in the travelling kitchen, and is served in a tent.

There is a roll-call about seven o'clock, and when this is over work commences. The big top is the first to go up—the king poles having been erected by the advance party. Soon everything is hurry and bustle and great activity, but it is all extremely orderly. Every one has his own particular job. And I mean every one. From the ring boys and labourers to the most important artistes, all have to do their bit in setting up the circus, in the same way that they all rally to help in any emergency.

Then the stablemen and horses arrive, and the stable tents are erected. Now the artistes and their caravans are arriving. To the casual observer the whole scene would be one of incredible confusion. But within four hours, and sometimes less, the whole circus is erected, and the menagerie open.

The first show starts at a quarter to five, and at four o'clock the band begins playing in the vestibule of the big top. The big top seats three thousand five hundred comfortably. The second show starts at eight o'clock, and at eleven o'clock

every one sighs with relief. The first day has been a success.

The first day in a new town is always hard. Most of the staff have been working from the small hours of the morning, and seldom get to bed before midnight. And then there is the strain of wondering whether the show will be a success.

Breakfast is served from eight to nine next morning, and after that there is a roll-call for the workmen. Then comes the colossal task of clearing up all the litter left by anything up to seven thousand people in the big top, the stables, the menagerie, and all over the ground. And then we are ready again for the afternoon show.

On the last day the show begins at half-past two, and the last show is at half-past five. It is over at nine, and almost before the last of the audience has gone, the workmen are at their positions for the pull-down. They are divided into parties of about twelve, according to their particular job, and each party is in charge of a foreman. One party takes the chairs and benches from the big top and stacks them in the wagons. Another takes down the big top itself. Tractors haul the loaded wagons from the ground, and heavy lorries tow them to the station. At the station is a party specially trained in the loading of the trains.

No more than two hours are required for the pull-down, and this includes even the loading of the trains. I remember that one night, just before we commenced to pull down, Mr Cyril Mills

came on to the ground and said: 'Well, boys, see what you can do. The pubs are open until eleven to-night. See if you can get done in time to have a drink.'

That night the pull-down was completed in an hour and a half, a record, and Mr Mills stood drinks all round at the nearest pub.

Things do not always go so easily, though. The circus man's biggest dread is a high wind with rain which makes canvas heavy and the ropes tighten up.

One year, at Bournemouth, the big top was blown to shreds, just after the last performance. But even disasters like this are allowed for—there was a spare big top at the station, ready packed.

Well, my first summer tour ended. But it was only the beginning of my long association with Bertram Mills's circus. At the end of it I was offered a contract, which I accepted, for the season 1930-1 at Olympia. This season I did almost as much work outside the ring as in it. Mr Mills was very generous, and always liked to give shows at the many children's hospitals in and around London. As the father of six children, I was delighted to do all I could to cheer up the poor little sick children.

But often, in London, I thought of life on the road, the peace at the end of a summer's day, the flags fluttering lazily from the big top, children playing on the grass. And the warm nights when, tired after the day's work, even the beasts heave their great flanks in contented sighs.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### CLOWNS AND AUGUSTES

PEOPLE call me Coco the Clown; but I am not a true clown according to the rules of the circus. I am an *auguste*.

There are three kinds of artistes who are known to the public as clowns: white clowns, who are the real clowns; *augustes*; and carpet clowns. The white clown is not supposed to be funny in appearance. He must have good looks, good clothes of a smart and conventional style, and good manners. He must speak well, in a pleasant voice. His make-up is always white, either zinc oxide or wet white, with the expressions put on with red or black grease-paint. He wears the traditional clothes of the clown—a white pointed hat, shaped like a cone, and a white suit covered with sequins. Sometimes the clothes of a clown are worth a lot of money.

One of the most famous of English clowns was Whimsical Walker, who made his last appearance in Bertram Mills's circus in 1934. Another is Joe Craston, who was trained by Lord George Sanger and is now the eldest clown of the Olympia circus. Joe Craston's daughter, Lulu, is also a clown. Another well-known clown is Harry

Sloan, who belongs to a family which is famous for stilt-walking.

Unlike the true clown, an *auguste* must be funny at first sight, and funny all the time. He can wear whatever style of clothes or make-up he likes, but it must be grotesque. Usually he has a big nose, baggy clothes, big boots. He may look as untidy and ragged as a tramp or beggar, though in fact he keeps his comic wardrobe carefully cleaned and brushed.

The *auguste* was first of all an assistant to the proper clown. He was the *buffo* or the foil, who had buckets of water poured over him or his face covered with paste. Nowadays the *auguste* is an act on his own. Often he has ingenious mechanical tricks, like the parasols and other gadgets which are displayed by Pinocchio. All the well-known *augustes* have a style and make-up of their own. It is not exactly their own copyright, but nobody else in the profession would dare to copy it. In the last ten years I have mostly used two styles. In one of them I wear an old cap with the peak at the side, a big and baggy coat, a large dress shirt and collar with an untidy black tie, a pair of steel-rimmed spectacles, and a big walrus moustache. But this is not my best-known make-up. Most people know me by my huge boots (which cost as much as £5 a pair), my floppy check suit, my big round nose and raised eyebrows, and the lank red hair that stands on end when I want to express surprise or fear.

In spite of all their queer devices, their electric eyes, false ears, exploding hats, enormous safety-pins and watches, boomerang hats, and strange wigs, *augustes* still keep one important part of their original character. They are still the butts and foils. They are always wrong. Everything they do is wrong. If the white clown is doing some conjuring trick the *auguste* joins in and spoils them. If there is anything to trip over, the *auguste* trips. He must be a skilled tumbler, and he must not mind cold water, for he will have plenty of falls, and many buckets will be tipped over him. Often, too, he must be a musician—enough of a musician to play the wrong notes at the right moments.

Thomson, Beasy, Busti, McGeachie the dwarf, Alby Austin, and Boston, these are some of the clowns well known to British audiences who are really *augustes*.

The third kind of clown is called a carpet clown. This is a different style entirely. The *augustes* and the ordinary clowns only appear at regular intervals, either in the clown entrée and charivari, in individual comedies, or between other acts. The carpet clown, however, has to be in the circus from the beginning to the end of the performance. It is his business to move amongst the audience, and keep every one laughing in the moments when nothing else is happening. A few carpet clowns, like Kelly, the American hobo clown, have a special character which they keep all through the show. But most of them rely on a great

number of different gags, costumes, and props. Theirs is a hard job. If they get a long engagement, such as a seven months' winter season on the Continent, they have to be always altering their acts, always thinking of new gags. What is a greater help to them than anything else is a good ring-master, such as Frank Foster, with whom to work their gags.

I have often acted as a carpet clown. I have tumbled, played musical instruments, done acts with dogs, worn hundreds of different costumes, spilt thousands of buckets of water. But I have never worn the make-up of a true white clown. My face is not that of a clown. Coco the Clown is really Coco the *Auguste*.

## CHAPTER XL

### TOGETHER AGAIN

WHEN I had finished working for Bertram Mills's Christmas season at Olympia in 1934, I decided to go back to Riga to fetch my four younger children — Olga, Nadia, Tamara, and Alexander — and bring them to England.

I left England in February; it was a very warm February and I had been walking about without an overcoat. But when I arrived in Riga the snow was eighteen inches deep, and it seemed like the heart of winter.

When I came to my mother-in-law's house the children were in bed. I was so anxious to see them, I hadn't seen them for such a long time, and I was so excited and talked so loudly, that the children woke up. They called: 'Daddy, daddy!' How they were pleased to see me! I had brought them some presents from London, and we talked for a long time.

Olga said to me: 'Is it true what granny says—that you will not leave us behind again, that you will take us with you to England?'

'Yes, my darling, I am going to take you with me to England.'

I could not sleep that night. I lay thinking that at last we would all be together again.

Next morning I took the children to town to buy them necessities for the journey. We met some friends in town, and we decided to go to the Circus Salamonski to see the show. I knew a great many of the artistes there, and my old partner Peko was still there. He kept asking me to start work again.

'That's right, Coco,' said the manager. 'Why shouldn't you work while you are here? It won't be very much, but it will pay your expenses.'

'Wait a minute,' I said, 'I didn't come back here to work, but to fetch my children to England. But I'll think it over and let you know to-morrow.'

But next morning I found that it was likely to take some time to complete the formalities, before I could take the children to England. Every child had to have a birth certificate, and some of them had been born in different towns and different countries, and it was going to take some time to get the certificates. So I decided to join the circus after all.

I found some old costumes of mine; and my old partner and I arranged a new comedy. It was very successful. The Riga audiences had always been good to me, and they did not fail me this time.

I was happy to be with my friends again, but for the first time I did not find the work satisfying. My mind was on England. Having lived there once, nothing would ever be the same again for

me when I wasn't there. There are people in England who do not seem to realize what a wonderful place it is. Its cities, so big and clean. And the beautiful countryside. Life can be lived there freely, and there is no cause to be afraid. And that makes its people kind.

After six weeks our arrangements for leaving Riga were complete. I was due to go on tenting tour with Bertram Mills's circus on 11th April. On 5th April we left Riga. All our friends came to the station to see us off. Some of them were laughing and shouting, but some of them were crying. Especially poor granny. Tamara cried too, when she saw her granny cry, and said: 'Daddy, I will stay with poor granny.'

At last the train started, and we left Riga for good.

I was Coco the Clown no longer. I was Coco the Nurse. You know what little children are like, God bless them. One wanted to sit down, and the other didn't. One wanted to eat, and the other to sleep, or to go out for a walk. I found a good medicine for them—I told them stories, until it was time for bed.

But bedtime wasn't very comfortable. I couldn't afford a sleeping carriage. I put two children on each seat, and sat on a case between them, to see that they didn't fall off.

We had to change trains at Cologne. Next night I was too tired to tell stories. I passed the second night also sitting on the case.

At last we arrived at Ostend, and changed on

to the boat. Here I had a chance to lie down for an hour, and I fell asleep at once. But I hadn't been asleep for ten minutes, when I heard a voice: 'Daddy, Alexander's gone!'

I jumped up. 'Where is Alexander?'

'I don't know, daddy.'

I ran on deck, and looked everywhere, but I couldn't find Alexander. I was just going to the captain to ask if the boat might be searched, when I saw a lady holding Alexander's hand. She came up from the first class.

'Alexander, where *have* you been?' I said.  
'I've been looking everywhere.'

The lady asked me if I spoke English.

'Certainly, madam. I must apologize for my son's behaviour.'

'I enjoyed his company,' she said, 'and I understood nearly everything he said. He spoke in German and in Russian. I understand that you are Coco the Clown. I saw you in Newcastle last year.'

I thanked the lady, and took Alexander to join the other children.

Soon we arrived at Dover. Here every one stared at us, because it was nice and warm in England, but my children were dressed like little Eskimos. The journey to London seemed very quick, after our other journeys, and we were soon at Victoria station.

We went out to Hammersmith on the top deck of a bus. The children could not believe their eyes. Such big buildings, such a lot of traffic.

I was proud to be able to explain the different parts of London we passed.

My wife cried with joy when we arrived. And I cried a little too. It was so wonderful to be together again in the safest country in the world.

## CHAPTER XLI

### TOGARE AND HIS CATS

So the summer season started once more, and we were all together in our caravan. The children were filled with wonder at the circus. Like their father before them, they had never seen such a wonderful circus.

One fine morning, Togare, the tiger trainer, opened the side wall of the tiger cages, so that his 'cats' could get some fresh air. Alexander and Tamara were playing on the ground, and when they saw Togare go into his caravan, Tamara said: 'Let's get some sugar for the dear tigers.'

Alexander fetched some sugar from the caravan, and ran back to the cage. He put his hand right through the bars with the sugar in it, and offered it to the tiger. The tiger was lying down. It did not move a muscle or even look at Alexander. It might have been stuffed.

Suddenly Togare looked out of his caravan window. He ran quickly to the cage. In a very quiet voice, almost in a whisper, he said: 'Don't move at all, Alexander, and take your hand slowly out of the cage.'

In the meantime I had seen what had happened, and I wanted to run to the cage, but Togare stopped me.

Little Alexander said: 'Look, Tamara, they have been eating so much meat in the morning, they do not want any sugar,' and he pulled his hand from the cage.

Togare pulled Alexander away from the cage. 'Little fool, do not do that again,' he said. 'It was a narrow escape.'

After this, I explained to my children the difference between the various animals—tigers, lions, elephants, and horses, etc. But Valentina and I decided that the safest place for them would be school, and we sent them to a convent school at Torquay.

Togare was one of the finest animal trainers that I have ever known, and not only was he a good trainer, he was a good showman as well. He never carried a whip or a stick in the ring, and several times, when attacked by lions or tigers, he had to rely on his cleverness alone to get him out of danger.

Togare's act was different from most animal trainers. He never used to let the tigers into the ring first. He would go into the big cage, take off his cape and hand it to his assistant. His assistant would go out of the ring, closing the cage door. Togare would then turn towards the bandstand. Underneath this was a huge idol—a sort of devil's mouth. The mouth would open and the audience would see flames and smoke belching out. Out of this diabolical, grinning mouth the tigers would jump one by one, right over the top of Togare.

One of Togare's best jumpers had a particularly bad temper. Togare would have two pedestals about twelve feet apart, and this tiger would jump from one pedestal to the other, right over the top of Togare, who stood in between.

One day the tiger jumped right on top of Togare, knocked him down, and scratched his chest badly. Togare jumped up at once as if nothing had happened. He made the tiger go back on to its pedestal and jump over him again. This time the tiger did not fail. In the meantime one of the assistants brought a bandage. Togare backed up to the bars of the cage and had the bandage put on him. Then he finished his act. The show must go on.

I had a little dog called Mousik (in Russian it means a dirty face), and every morning at seven o'clock except on Sundays, you could see him sitting by Togare's caravan, waiting for him to come and feed his 'cats.' Togare would take him near the cages where he used to cut the meat up, and Mousik always had his portion as well as the tigers. Mousik never went too near to the cages, he knew it was dangerous.

One year the circus visited Plymouth for two weeks. The ground was not very far from the railway station. It was a small ground. The caravans and the dressing tent were very close to the big top.

One afternoon, the performance was drawing to its end. Togare's act was the last on the programme. As usual, he went first into the big

cage, took off his cape and gave it to his assistant. But it was not the same man, and as he walked out of the cage he forgot to close the door behind him. Togare, who could see nothing behind him as he faced the huge idol, coaxed his tigers one by one into the ring. No one had noticed anything was wrong. The tigers padded round the big cage, and then out of the open door.

Someone screamed. Togare swung round, and at once saw what had happened. He ran to the door and closed it, but by that time three fierce, man-eating tigers were at liberty. By this time they had gone outside the big top.

As always in an emergency, every one had to do their bit. There were eight of us clowns, and we all ran into the ring, laughing, joking, and making gags to amuse the audience and keep them from panicking. But the audience were marvellous—there was no panic, and I don't think some of them realized that anything very unusual had happened.

Outside the big top, there was real hunting. Togare, half naked in his oriental costume, followed the tigers, calling to them by name. One of them soon heard his master calling, and came up to him. Togare backed slowly towards the cage, the tiger following until they were both in the cage, and tiger number one was captured.

During this time, as I heard afterwards, my wife and children were having tea in the caravan, which was backed on to a tent. She went during tea and opened the door into the tent. Can you

imagine her face when she saw a tiger in the tent! But she didn't lose her head. She closed the door slowly, ran into the caravan, packed all the children into bed, and closed all the windows. But the tiger went underneath the caravan and stayed there for some time.

Togare came and called him by name, in the soft voice he used in the ring. The tiger heard him and came out from underneath the caravan. He followed him slowly to the cage. When the tiger saw other tigers in the cage, he started to purr very loudly, just like a cat, and hurried into the cage without any trouble.

The third tiger was not so easy to capture, and they had to use a net. Afterwards I heard a funny story about this tiger. Outside, a long queue of people were waiting for the evening performance. As they stood there, this tiger padded quietly along by the queue. The people were delighted. Of course this was a tame tiger, there to amuse them while they had to wait.

'Isn't he lovely?' they said. 'Just like a great big cat.'

And some of them leant over the railing and kindly scratched the tiger's back. This, the fiercest of Togare's tigers!

When all the three tigers were captured, we clowns left the ring, and Togare came back and did his act. He did it better than ever before. The band played *God save the King*, and that was the end of another performance.

A week after this happened, a friend of mine in

Paris sent me a Russian newspaper in which there was an account of the accident. The newspaper said that the last tiger was caught by a sailor on the railway station. But the funniest part of the story was that the sailor caught the tiger single-handed by lassoing it like a cowboy!

## CHAPTER XLII

### THE GREATEST HIGH-WIRE ACT

OF all the dangerous and daring acts in the circus the one that thrills an audience most is high-wire walking. The bravest and most spectacular act I ever saw was a high-wire act. It was in Glasgow, in 1932. The performers were the great Wallendas. In the ordinary way their act was one of the most exciting the Bertram Mills circus has ever known; but on this evening they did much more than their usual act—they snatched themselves from the brink of disaster, and did it like true artistes. Let me tell you about it.

The Wallendas, who could claim to be the greatest high-wire act of all time, were three young men and a girl named Lulu. The wire on which they walked was placed forty to forty-five feet above the arena. There was no net below. At each end of the wire was a small platform on which they stood before beginning their act, and on which they landed at the end of it.

The Wallendas each carried a long white pole, which helped them to keep their balance. For their chief feature act, which came as the finale to the performance, two of the boys supported two parallel steel poles, about seven feet long, the ends of which rested on their two shoulders,

and were held there by shoulder hooks. Midway between them a chair was placed on the two poles. Very carefully another of the troupe climbed up and sat in this chair. Then Lulu Wallenda, the girl, climbed up and stood behind him.

When they were ready, the men carrying the poles began to walk slowly along the high wire, until they reached the centre. There, forty feet high above the arena, with no net to break a fall, they balanced on the wire, holding the steel poles on their shoulders, with the chair balanced on the poles. Then, with great care, Lulu climbed on to the shoulders of the man on the chair. Finally, the man, with Lulu balancing on his shoulders, himself climbed up, stood on the seat of the chair, and then sat down on its high back.

This in itself was a superb feat of balancing, but it became all the more thrilling when the whole group, in this hazardous pose, began slowly to move forward along the wire. The two men who were holding the poles put one foot in front of the other, every movement perfectly timed, every stress and strain perfectly controlled. Along the high wire they walked, until they reached the end. Even when this was accomplished they had to face the tricky task of unloading Lulu, the boy on the chair, and the chair itself.

On this evening, which I shall always remember with awe, they had just reached the end of the wire, and were getting ready to unload, when one of the men suddenly shouted: 'Look out!' At the

same moment, with a rending sound, the platform gave way, and began to fall. It seemed that nothing could save the four Wallendas from a forty-foot drop into the arena, and terrible injuries, even if they were not killed outright.

What happened, in that split second after the platform fell, was one of the miracles of the circus. Although the collapse was utterly unexpected, although all sense of control and balance was lost and the pole and the chair were falling about them, the boys immediately realized their only hope. As they fell through the air they grabbed wildly at the high wire, grasped it in their hands, clung to it. Most marvellous of all, the eldest of them also caught the girl with his legs, twisted them round her body, and at the same time held on to the wire. This was the most astonishing unrehearsed trick I have ever seen.

Even now they were still in acute danger. To add to it, the girl fainted, and the man who had caught her had to hold her limp body between his knees and ankles.

Inch by inch, however, they slid their hands along the wire, and moved towards the king poles. In a ghastly and breathless hush the huge audience watched them. Then, one after another, they reached the king poles, stepped on to the rope ladders, and climbed down to the ground in safety.

This alone was an achievement of heroism and skill which nobody present could ever forget. But this was not the end. What followed after-

wards set the seal of the great artiste upon the performance.

As they climbed down the rope ladders the girl recovered from her faint. They ran from the ring without fuss or concern, just as though it were the end of their normal act. Then they came running back in the usual way and took their bow.

For a moment the audience was spellbound in silence. Then every one burst into tremendous applause. In the midst of the cheering and clapping the musical director struck up *God save the King*. Audience, artistes, and staff stood to attention; and as the last note died away there came another great burst of applause.

I stood by the entrance and watched the thousands of spectators file out of the big top. They were all talking excitedly about the astonishing thrill they had seen. And on their faces you could see smiles of relief and happiness. They had been witnesses of a terrible ordeal and a triumph of courage. The Wallendas had defeated death—and they had taken their bow.

The show goes on. The Wallendas went on. But death took its revenge. In Copenhagen, some years later, the Wallendas fell again. Two of them were badly injured. Another was injured for life. The fourth was killed. Such is the toll of the circus.

## CHAPTER XLIII

### THE GUV'NOR

IT was in 1938, when we were at Luton, all ready for the opening performance of the summer tour, that we had news that the Guv'nor was dead. I cannot describe to you what we felt. Dazed, and as if something vital had gone out of our lives.

It had been Mr Mills's last wish that the show should go on as usual, and with great bravery, Mr Cyril and Mr Bernard Mills came down that same afternoon and the show *did* go on.

I shall never forget the stricken look on the faces of the artistes—men and women and children—at the service that was given in the ring at Luton to the Guv'nor's memory. We sat round in the seats, and the circus chaplain preached from a pulpit made of six elephant barrels. The band played *Abide with Me*, and I think every one there had tears in their eyes.

Bertram Mills was one of the finest men I ever knew. He was always a good friend to Coco the Clown and Nicolai the man. I would have worked for him anywhere and for whatever salary he had offered. Although he was not born to the circus he built up the greatest circus England has ever known, and one whose name is famous all over the world. The Olympia circus has be-

come the best known of all the Christmas entertainments in London, and the artistes whom the Guv'nor employed have become known as the finest in their profession.

In some circuses many of the old and traditional elements have been sacrificed to modern ideas. Although Bertram Mills was always the first to discover big new acts and original performers he never abandoned any of the old glories of the circus, and was always most strict in observing all the little details of production that make the circus different from any other kind of entertainment.

There used to be some people who thought that the day of the clown was ended, and that different kinds of comedy were wanted by modern audiences. Bertram Mills, however, knew better than that. He knew that the traditional white-faced clown and the grotesque *auguste* are lovable and everlasting figures, combining comedy with just a touch of sadness in a way which will always appeal to the great audience. He brought the circus clown back to favour in England. Always his shows were marked by big gatherings of clowns of all kinds. The clown entrée and charivari were big and lavish features in which the Guv'nor took a keen and special interest.

It is through Bertram Mills that the circus clown has regained the glory that was his in the days of Joseph Grimaldi, a hundred years ago. Tradition means much to a clown who is a real artiste. Not long after I joined the Bertram

Mills circus I was asked, as a result of the Guv'nor's interest, to commemorate the anniversary of Grimaldi's death by going with other clowns and laying a wreath on his grave in St James's church-yard, Pentonville. At that time I made a promise that I would do this every year, and so I have.

We have sadly missed Mr Mills's familiar figure at the ringside—his short stocky figure, his ruddy face, with the twinkling blue eyes, and the blue cornflower always in his buttonhole. Bless the Guv'nor. Although his coach has rounded the last bend in the road, we will never forget him.

To-day, Mr Cyril Mills is head of the famous circus. Not a single act is booked for Olympia unless it is first personally inspected by him. This means that he has to travel the length and breadth of Europe, and indeed all over the world. To do this he uses an aeroplane as much as possible. He now owns his own plane and flies it himself. He has permits to land on most of the world's big aerodromes. This has made him known in the circus as 'the flying director.' He has an uncanny knowledge of what the English circus audience will like or dislike, and it is this that, year after year, makes the Bertram Mills circus the great success it is.

## CHAPTER XLIV

### THE OLDEST MAN IN THE WORLD

I SHALL always remember one of the greatest attractions Mr Cyril Mills brought over from America—it was Zaro Aga. He was a Turk, and was then supposed to be one hundred and fifty-six years old. He was a man about five foot six inches tall. He had very big hands and a long face. His face was so wrinkled that it looked like the skin of a baked apple. He had a white moustache. His eyes were very small, but his ears were twice as long as those of a normal person. He wore European clothes when he arrived in England.

I found Zaro Aga particularly interesting because his manager told me that he was a soldier in the Turkish army when they were fighting Russia. And he could remember the time when Napoleon invaded Russia, too.

I speak a little Turkish, and his manager took me to Zaro Aga's tent. He told Zaro Aga who I was. I spoke to him in Turkish, and he spoke to me in Russian. We shook hands and were friends from this time. I used to go to Zaro Aga's tent nearly every day after this, but the trouble was that he could never remember me from one day to the next. But I used to speak

to him in Russian, and then he would remember, and he always saluted me like a soldier.

One day, when we arrived in Colwyn Bay, we found it very difficult to get lodgings—all the lodging-houses were full of summer visitors. I managed to get lodgings about two and a half miles from the circus ground. When I got back to the ground I found Zaro Aga's manager very worried about lodgings. So I suggested that they should lodge in the house where I was staying. It was such a long way from the ground that I agreed to drive Zaro Aga to and from the circus in my car.

When we arrived there, the manager arranged about the rooms, and explained to the landlady what sort of meals to prepare for Zaro Aga. They never gave him any meat, but only vegetables, milk, and fish.

While this was going on, suddenly, we heard someone crying. We ran into the front room, and there was Zaro Aga, sitting on the sofa, sobbing, and holding his face in his hands. The manager asked him, in Turkish, what was the matter. Zaro Aga said he had the toothache. The manager asked him to open his mouth. He looked in and said: 'Never mind, we can soon cure him.'

The manager took a pot of jam and a spoon off the table, and put a spoonful in Zaro Aga's mouth. When he had swallowed it, the manager said: 'How is your toothache now?'

'Very very good,' said Zaro Aga.

'Since when has jam been a cure for toothache?' I asked the manager.

'You see, Coco, Zaro Aga is just like a child, he is very fond of sweet things. Of course, he lost all his teeth seventy years ago.'

When we left the room Zaro Aga already had his fingers in the jam-pot.

We had a pleasant time there together. After the show we would come back to supper, and after supper we would sit talking. I loved to watch Zaro Aga. He was just like a child. He loved playing with toys, and would play with my son and daughter by the hour.

One day the famous band leader, Jack Hylton, came to see the show. I asked him if I could take a picture of him with Zaro Aga, and he said that certainly I could. The manager said to Zaro Aga: 'Come, the Russ will take some pictures.'

Zaro Aga clapped his hands and was very happy. He loved having his picture taken. He asked for more, and was taken with his arm round Jack Hylton.

One morning I heard a terrible noise on the landing upstairs. The manager was banging on the bathroom door with both hands.

'Zaro, open the door, please open the door. I have plenty jam and sweets, and red money for you. If you open the door I will give you how much jam you want.'

Then I went upstairs. The manager asked me to help him break down the door. 'It doesn't matter how much it costs,' he said.

I helped him, and we pushed down the door. There was Zaro Aga, standing by the mirror as if he hadn't heard us at all. His face was smothered in soap, and he was trying to shave himself with an empty razor. What a child!

We were two weeks in those lodgings, and I enjoyed myself very much. I am a clown, and therefore it is difficult for anybody to make me laugh, but Zaro Aga made me laugh many times.

I was sad when a few years later I read in the newspaper that Zaro Aga was dead. He lived to be one hundred and fifty-eight.

## CHAPTER XLV

### SOME CIRCUS FRIENDS

IN 1937 I met Captain Roland Wesley, the famous trainer of sea-lions. I think he had the best sea-lion act ever seen on the road. His father himself captures the sea-lions off the Californian coast and trains them himself, handing them over to his sons, as they require them for their acts.

Captain Wesley and I became friends, and my sorrow was great when I heard of his misfortune. After years of patient training, Captain Wesley had made his sea-lion act one of the sensations of the circus. They could juggle with anything, and could do tight-rope walking and balancing, to say nothing of catching and eating fish. The triumph of the whole performance was when one of the sea-lions played *God save the King* on a six-note trumpet. These animals seemed almost human, and I am sure they were nearly as precious to Captain Wesley as his own children.

At the end of the summer tour he went to Europe. While he was in Belgium the sea-lions became ill, and a short time after he returned to England they died, one after another. To lose one would have been serious, but to lose them all nearly broke poor Captain Wesley. But he went back to America, got some more sea-lions, and

trained them with the help of his brother. And I am glad to say that they were a great success at Olympia.

And then there was Koringa. Another good friend of mine. Those of you who have seen the circus at Olympia will remember her act—how she hypnotizes a crocodile and a python, lies down on broken glass, and walks up and down steps made of sword-blades. She is also buried for five minutes in a box filled with sand. This is probably the most spectacular of her acts. As a matter of fact I have done this act myself, though not in England, and it nearly had disastrous results for me. But to tell that story would be to reveal one of the most closely guarded secrets of the circus.

Koringa lost her parents of a fever when she was very small, and was looked after by her grand-parents, who were unkind to her. She earned her living by diving for money thrown by passengers off the ships in the harbour. Koringa was always fond of animals, especially the less attractive ones—crocodiles and snakes, and at last she left the East, and spent a few years travelling with very small circuses in Europe. And now, at twenty-four, she is almost at the top of the bill in the circus world.

A genius in the training of elephants is John Gindl, an Austrian. He had the training and showing of six female Burmese elephants belonging to Mr Bertram Mills himself. They were young ones, and John Gindl did so much with

them in three months that it seemed in time that there would be nothing in the circus they couldn't do! He was always anxious that visitors should feed them by the mouth and not by the trunk.

'An elephant going round the ring waving its trunk for food would not look pretty,' he said.

People are always wanting to know what is in the bottles that the elephants drink out of: it is sugared water, and they love it.

Talking of elephants reminds me of an elephant I knew called Jenny. After the summer tour with Bertram Mills's circus in 1935, I was free for six weeks, until the beginning of Olympia. I had had an offer from the Circus Staniewski in Warsaw to work with them for one month, and I decided to accept it.

I arrived there two days before the show started, and at once I saw billed an act I knew. It was 'Jenny and Picolo.' They were two elephants. Jenny was a very clever elephant. She could type out her name on a typewriter, and she could count and knew many numbers.

I went to the circus, but could see nobody about. So I went into the stables to see Jenny and Picolo. I stopped to watch them for a little while. I saw Jenny stretch out her trunk to reach the water-tap. She could just reach it. She turned the tap on and put her trunk on it to get some water. When she had got enough she tried to take her trunk off the tap, but it was not so easy. All the time the water was running from the tap and soon her trunk was filled, but she couldn't get it

off. Then she got her temper up and she pulled her trunk very hard. She got it off the tap, but unfortunately she pulled the whole pipe off the wall and broke it, and the water poured out.

Elephants love water. I wish you could have seen how Jenny and Picolo enjoyed themselves! They started to dance and trumpet. They sucked up water in their trunks and threw it over themselves. All the hay got soaked, and they started to throw the hay over themselves too. They had a lovely time!

Then their trainer came running up, and the water was turned off. Jenny and Picolo were transferred to other stables. When it was all over I shook hands with the elephant trainer, who was very wet, and we were very pleased to see each other.

'You know, Coco,' he said, 'I do not know what to do with Jenny. She is so playful I cannot leave her for a minute. You know what she did to me the other day? No? I had to travel from Belgium to Poland, through Germany. At the frontier a German police officer put his head into the truck to see what was inside. And what was? Jenny. And she put her trunk round his hat and pulled it off. She put it in her mouth and started to chew it. I shouted at her: "Jenny, give the hat back at once," and certainly she gave it back. She took it from her mouth and gave it to me. But can you imagine what the hat was like? But there, you cannot help it. An elephant is always an elephant.'

## CHAPTER XLVI

AUGUST 1939

IN the last week of August 1939 I was midway through my tenth summer tenting-tour with the Bertram Mills circus. And what a superb show it was. All the favourite clowns and *augustes* were there. Mroczkowski's superb liberty horses were in perfect training, and Gena Lipkowska, Mroczkowski's wife, was winning the admiration of the audience for her beauty, and its applause for the grace and perfection of her Arab horses. Nicolai Trifonidis, who had been badly mauled by one of his tigers at Oxford, was showing his thrilling lion-and-tiger act. There were six performing elephants. Frederico, with the iron jaw, was making thousands hold their breath as he swung his partner around in the heights of the big top, supporting the pair of them by his teeth only. And Koringa, again, was mystifying every one by seemingly defying knives and crocodiles' teeth, and by being buried alive, while Kelly . . . Yes, it was nearly as perfect a show as can be. Not so large and spectacular, of course, as the annual show at Olympia, but nevertheless, as great a triumph of entertainment, organization, and showmanship as has ever been seen on the road.

I spent a good deal of my time doing outside performances, going round to the hospitals, entertaining invalids and children, or making publicity appearances in big stores of the cities we visited, so I had more opportunity than usual to watch the performance in the ring.

As I stood by the ring gates, watching the entrances and exits of the artistes, the elephants and tigers, the performing dogs, seeing Frank Foster, the ring-master, go by, listening to the laughter and applause of the audience, I thought of the changes and contrasts I had known in my circus life. Seeing this miracle of organization, my mind went back to an open-air circus in which I had once worked, years ago, in Estonia.

I do not think English people know what a real open-air circus is. It has no king-poles or quarter poles, no big top. It has just side-walling, with iron stakes driven into the earth to support it. Inside, there are seats and a ring fence, also a little stage. Of course, everything depends on the weather. If it rains there is no show, and sometimes it is held up for a week or more.

At the place I am thinking of there was a little hill outside the circus, where people could stand and see the show for nothing. So we had what we called a 'speaker,' who would go out and speak to the people. 'Ladies and gentlemen, you would not like to see our artistes working for nothing, so I ask you, ladies and gentlemen, to come in, and you will see better. There are comfortable seats and a first-class performance.'

One woman with two children, standing outside, said: 'We cannot afford to pay.'

'Never mind, madam, if you cannot pay full price, perhaps you can pay half price?'

Then the people started to move, some went away and some went inside. The speaker turned round, and he saw a young man sitting in a tree. He said to him: 'Young man, don't you want to go in and see the show?'

'No, thank you, I am very nice and comfortable here.'

The speaker said: 'Ladies and gentlemen, if any of you do not like the show, you have every right to ask for your money back.'

I was on the stage by this time, and I watched the speaker talking to the people. He was doing his best, because he knew that if there was no performance there would be no meals for us. Suddenly I heard a loud crack. I looked, and I saw that the young man who had been sitting in the tree had fallen out of it. How the people laughed; it was funnier than anything on the stage.

About fifty people were in the circus by this time, and we got ready to begin the show. And then down came the rain, very hard. At once the people got up and started to run out. They all went to the pay desk and asked for their money back. Well, there we were—breakfast, dinner, and supper all gone, and I had had nothing to eat the day before. And then I started to laugh. I could not stop laughing; I thought I had gone

crazy. My friend came and asked me what was the matter, but I could not answer him for laughing. All I could do was to point to where the audience should have been. There, sitting alone, was an old gentleman of about sixty. He was holding an umbrella up over himself. I went up to him and said: 'I'm sorry, sir, but the show is postponed because of the weather. If you like you can ask for your money back.'

Then the gentleman also started to laugh. He said: 'I do not want my money back. I have enjoyed myself very much. Here are five kronen.'

He got up, closed his umbrella, and walked slowly away from the circus, still laughing to himself.

When I went back to my friend, he said: 'If I were not so hungry I would laugh as well. Look at yourself, Coco!'

I looked in a mirror, and the red dye from my wig was running down my face, my make-up was spoiled, and all my clothes were soaking wet. I looked like a cat that has just come out of a bath.

It is when I remember incidents like this that I realize how different the last nine years have been. In the Bertram Mills circus the artistes do not have to worry about anything. The only thing they have to look after is their act and their own costume. All the artistes are like one big family; everything is clean and well organized, and the circus has its own carpenters, blacksmiths, electricians, mechanics, fitters, saddlers, kitchen and cooks, and even its own fire engine.

As I lived my peaceful, contented life in the midst of this large and prosperous circus family it seemed to me that all my troubles were a thing of the past. I had seen two wars, in 1905-6 and in 1914-18. I had been through revolution. I had fought in three different armies. I had worked in all kinds of conditions. I had known what it was to be poor, almost to starve. I had known, for brief periods, what it was to be rich. And now I knew what it was to be comfortable, to have a modest but secure livelihood, doing the work I loved.

My son, who still had much to learn, but seemed to be shaping well to follow in his father's footsteps, was working with me. Many of my friends of earlier days were here too. Every sort of nationality was represented in the Bertram Mills circus: Australian, French, Indian, Polish, Czechoslovak, Greek, Italian, German and many more, besides. In spite of rumours and startling news, none of them, in this happy month of August, thought that another war would come. . . .

'Hurry along, please! The show starts in five minutes. One and three to your right, two and six to your left. Three and nine, five shillings and seven and six straight forward. Hurry along there, please. Programme?'

## EXIT CLOWN

BUT war came. It broke over us like the thunder-storm over the little open-air circus in Esthonia.

Amid the destruction and misery of this great new war the fate of Coco the Clown, or Nicolai the man, is not a thing that matters. But my story must have an ending. And this is it.

At the outbreak of war the Bertram Mills circus had to pack in, before time, since transport became impossible. Olympia was taken over by the Government, so there could be no Olympia circus at Christmas—the first break in a tradition of nineteen years. Mr Cyril Mills got together a small show, and four weeks I played in it, at music-halls and suburban theatres. But the time came when, after nearly ten of the happiest years of my life, I had to say good-bye to the Bertram Mills circus.

Once again I was out of work. Soon my few savings had gone. Before long I was desperately looking for any kind of work that would provide food and clothing for Valentina and my children. I became night porter at an hotel for twenty-five shillings a week. Then, for four weeks, I worked as a labourer, digging up roads and laying gas pipes, for two pounds eleven shillings a week. At Christmas, Coco the Clown returned for three weeks, to make his first appearance in an English

pantomime—*Cinderella*, at the Palace Theatre, Reading.

And now, as I end my book, Coco is back where he started. After years of seeing happy, expectant audiences queuing up to see Coco the Clown, Coco himself has now joined the queue—the queue that waits at the labour exchange to draw the dole.

I make no complaints of life. I have had a full one so far. I am a clown, and a clown I shall always be. Perhaps a clown learns to be something of a philosopher. And a clown has many parts to play. Perhaps in my next part I shall become a soldier again, fighting in yet another uniform, under yet another flag, to repay the debt I owe to England for the happiness England has given me.

And then, if Nicolai survives his third war, perhaps Coco the Clown will come back to the sawdust ring once more. Who can tell? Life is a circus; on with the show! One day, perhaps, the tumbler will fall on his feet again.

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# QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

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## QUESTIONS AND EXERCISES

The more advanced questions are marked by an asterisk.

### CHAPTERS I—V

1. What explanation does Coco give for his love of the theatre?
- ✓2. 'Ha! What's this — a young nightingale?' Relate the incident which is brought to mind by this quotation.
- ✓3. Coco's mother was poor, but scrupulously honest. Give proof of this fact.
- ✓4. Coco felt 'some childish resentment' when his father returned from the war. Why?
- ✓5. Mention three ways in which Coco had experience as a youthful entertainer.
- ✓6. Describe Coco's feelings as he waited for his turn to play in *The Bell*.
7. Explain the meaning of: charivari; property man; copeck; Cossack; auditorium.
- \*8. Quote examples of Coco's determination to persevere in face of difficulties.
- \*9. Compare the attitude of Coco's mother towards him with that adopted by his father.

### CHAPTERS VI—X

1. Describe the occasion upon which Coco 'longed to be cold.'

2. What made Coco wish to become an acrobat? Give an account of the ways in which his ambition was fulfilled.

3. Explain the ruses by which Coco:

- (a) Obtained money from the organ man.
- (b) Left Vitebsk station without a ticket.
- (c) Travelled from Vitebsk to Riga.

4. For what reason did Coco decide to leave the organ man?

5. 'Come out, little boy, I've seen you for a long time.' Recount the incident of which this quotation reminds you.

6. How did Coco spend his first night at Vitebsk?

7. What was it that made Coco decide that he was 'going to be a clown and nothing else'?

8. On what occasion did Coco feel that he was dreaming and pray that he would not wake up?

9. Say what you know of Lazerenko. Why did he take a particular interest in Coco?

10. Why did Coco leave Lazerenko, and how did he earn money for his train fare?

\*11. Give a résumé of the adventures of Coco from the morning he played truant from school to his return home.

\*12. Mention some of the characteristics of style in writing which are most in evidence in this autobiography.

\*13. It is unlikely that a young boy in England would have experiences such as those which befell Coco. Account for this.

## CHAPTERS XI—XV

1. 'I love it, father, they are teaching me to be a great artiste.' Why did Coco say this?
2. What were the terms of Coco's apprenticeship to Signor Truzi?
3. What had Truzi to say about the accomplishments needed to make a good clown?
4. Tell the story of how Coco ran away from a baby bear.
5. Say what you know about the training of a circus apprentice.
6. Why did Coco run away from the Circus Truzi?
7. As vividly as you can, give an account of how Coco found work at a travelling theatre.
8. 'One day, when you are a great artiste, you will remember and thank me for this.' On what occasion were these words spoken?
9. Mention some of the events and scenes associated with the transportation of a large circus.
10. In your own words tell the story of the storm in Vilno.
11. How did the name *Coco* originate?  
\*12. Coco's father for a long time tried to thwart his son's ambitions, but later gave him encouragement. Give evidence of this change.  
\*13. Indicate the character of Signor Truzi, and say what effect his manner and methods had upon Coco.

## CHAPTERS XVI—XVIII

1. By what means did Coco obtain a theatrical contract in St Petersburg?
2. How did Coco use the money he earned in St Petersburg?
3. Tell of the occasions on which strangers appealed to Coco for money in Moscow.
4. Describe how Coco was arrested by the police.
5. 'He'd keep his own mother here if it suited him.' Of whom was this said, and for what reason?
6. How did the treatment which Coco received at Feodosia compare with that which he experienced on the journey from Moscow?
7. Give a detailed description of prison conditions in Russia as recorded by Coco.
8. Why was it not wholly unfortunate that Coco was kicked by a prison warder?
- \*9. What criticisms have you to make concerning police methods and prison conditions in Russia? Let your criticism be constructive.
- \*10. Follow Coco's journey from Moscow to Feodosia on the map, and estimate the approximate distance. Discuss the changes in climate which would be apparent on the way.

## CHAPTERS XIX—XXII

1. Describe Coco's efforts to make himself clean after his imprisonment.
2. Say how Coco was helped by the barber and his wife, and why he did not stay long with them.

3. 'Yes, I can see that by your clothes.' What incident is brought to mind by these words?
4. What was Coco's chief anxiety when he returned to circus work?
5. Retell the story of the devil-man.
6. What did Coco do after he left Kharkov?
7. Give an account of the circus act that gave Coco a bad fright.
- \*8. Recapitulate briefly the adventures of Coco from the time he left Truzi (Chapter XVI) until he returned to him.
- \*9. Discuss the effects of circus life and travel upon the character of a boy such as Coco.

### CHAPTERS XXIII—XXVII

1. Why did Coco enjoy saying: 'Be off with you. I am an outrider. We do not talk with foot-sloggers'?
2. Relate how Coco won a medal.
3. Describe the revolutionary scenes witnessed by Coco at the bridge over the River Neva.
4. How did Coco reach Riga from Petrograd?
5. 'Well, clown, we have a theatre here for you.' Explain the circumstances in which this was said.
6. How did Coco and his father fare during the famine in Moscow?
7. By what mischance was Coco sent to Siberia?
8. 'A hungry audience, laughing at a hungry clown.' To what does this quotation refer?
9. Tell the story of how a box of matches led to a marriage feast.

\*10. Write an essay on the conditions existing in Russia during the revolution.

\*11. Narrate some of the events which led Coco to say that 'Nicolai the boy slowly died, giving place to Nicolai the man.'

### CHAPTERS XXVIII—XXXI

1. How did Coco's wife contrive to stay with her husband when he had to join the Latvian Army? Say what arrangements were made for her.

2. Give an account of the reunion of Coco and Bono. How did Bono offer to repay Coco's kindness?

3. Explain how it came about that at one time Coco was 'selling lozenges instead of laughs.'

4. 'My fee is just the number of laughs you have given me.' Who said this, and for what reason?

5. Tell the story of Tamara's fall.

6. How did Tamara's accident affect Coco's plans? Say why he cycled to Kaunas, and give a description of the ride.

\*7. From your reading of the book to this point, give your views on the attitude of circus artistes towards colleagues in distress. Illustrate by quoting instances.

\*8. Enumerate what you consider to be:

(a) the joys

(b) the disadvantages and discomforts of circus life.

## CHAPTERS XXXII—XXXIV

1. Why does Coco refer to his own circus as a 'hire-purchase' show?
2. Who appears to have been the hardest worker in Coco's circus? Give reasons for your answer.
3. Recount in detail the incident that led to the disbandment of Coco's circus.
4. Why was Coco taken to Abeli when he left hospital? In your own words tell the story of the journey.
5. Say what you know of the difficulties that stood between Coco and his ambition to make good in Berlin.
6. How did the knowledge of his wife's grave illness affect Coco's performance at the circus?
- \*7. Quote Coco's observations concerning the relationship between money and happiness. Mention occasions (from any part of the book) when he appears to have been contented though poor.
- \*8. Coco more than once displayed courage of a high order. Quote instances from your reading up to this point.

## CHAPTERS XXXV—XXXIX

1. Account for Coco's dislike of fish and chips.
2. What is the 'big top'? Mention some of the things that amazed Coco when he saw Bertram Mills's circus.
3. Explain Coco's mystification about 'Mr Pleasetermeetcher.'

4. Tell the story of the 'cellist who 'never felt quite the same about cats again.'
5. Mention some of the skilled tradesmen to be found among circus hands.
6. Explain clearly the difference between white clowns, *augustes*, and carpet clowns.
7. Of whom does Coco say that he must be 'enough of a musician to play the wrong notes at the right moments'? Explain what he means by this.
- \*8. From your reading of the book up to this point enumerate some of the scares and accidents recorded by Coco.
- \*9. Coco calls the summer tour of a circus 'a miracle of perfect organization.' Summarize the information he gives to prove this.

## CHAPTERS XL—XLII

1. Explain how Coco came to accept his last contract in Riga.
2. What is Coco's opinion of England?
3. 'Little fool, do not do that again.' To what incident do these words refer?
4. Relate Coco's thrilling story about the escaped tigers.
5. Say clearly what the Wallendas used to do in their final act.
6. Describe in detail the occurrence which was 'the most astonishing unrehearsed trick' Coco had ever seen.
- \*7. Do you think that all of the risks taken by

circus artistes are justifiable? Give arguments for and against the presentation of dangerous acts.

\*8. Enumerate some of the many differences which Coco would notice between England and the Continent—both in circus life and elsewhere.

### CHAPTER XLIII TO THE END

1. 'Although his coach has rounded the last bend in the road, we will never forget him.' Say what you know about the person of whom Coco writes thus.

2. Give instances of Zaro Aga's childish behaviour.

3. In a few words say what Coco has to tell us about Captain Wesley, Koringa, and Gindl.

4. What are the duties of a 'speaker'?

5. Mention some of the difficulties experienced in running an open-air circus.

6. How did the outbreak of war in 1939 affect Coco?

7. 'One day, perhaps, the tumbler will fall on his feet again.' Mention some of the occasions in Coco's life when he 'fell on his feet.'

\*8. 'The show must go on.' From the whole of the book collect all the examples you can find which prove how this rule is observed in circus life.

\*9. Taking the whole of Coco's life-story, quote instances of apparent misfortune which turned out later to Coco's advantage.

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